

Indicative ALMO

Charnwood Borough Council

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high quality local and national services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

This inspection has been carried out by the Housing Inspectorate using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council;
- judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- promotes further improvements in the service; and
- has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

Summary

- 1 Charnwood Borough Council is a district council in the Midlands. The population is 153,500 of which 10.8 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.
- 2 The council is led by a joint Labour and Liberal administration. Of the 52 seats 24 are Conservative, 22 Labour and 6 Liberal Democrat.
- 3 The council employs 613.5 full time equivalent staff across all services.
- 4 The housing inspection covered the main components of the landlord service: access and customer care; diversity; repairs and maintenance; allocations and lettings; income management, tenancy and estate management and supported housing. The service is estimated to cost £12 million for 2004/05.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed Charnwood Borough Council as providing a ‘poor’ service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹

	Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent					‘a poor service that has promising prospects for improvement’ A good service?
Promising	☀				
Uncertain					
Poor					
	Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 6 The housing service is **poor**. There are substantial weaknesses.
- The service is not customer focussed and is not driven by providing the service that the customers would like to see.
 - The responsive repairs system is poor and has no focus on customer care and is not value for money.
 - The Council is not meeting its legal obligations to carry out gas servicing to appliances in tenants homes and this is placing tenants at risk.
 - There are no service standards in place for tenants.
 - In some areas of the service, complaints are not addressed.
 - There is very limited focus on developing resident involvement in the running of the service.

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- The housing service is not meeting all its equalities legislative requirements and the service is unable to demonstrate that it understands and responds to the diverse needs of its customers.
 - There has not been systematic investment in the housing stock and there are not currently any agreed investment programmes to ensure that the Council meets the decent homes standard (DHS) by 2010.
 - There is inadequate stock condition information to plan improvements.
 - The housing service is not receiving a value for money service from the Council's current contract procurement methods.
 - The post void repairs process is inefficient and not customer focused with tenants facing very long waits for repairs to be completed and major repairs being carried out causing disruption for tenants.
 - The aids and adaptation service is not promoted effectively to tenants and there are insufficient funds to meet current demand.
 - The housing service is not effectively managing rent arrears.
 - Much of the accommodation for sheltered tenants is not of a good quality and there are large numbers of unpopular bedsits with shared facilities.
 - There is no asset management plan in place to tackle unpopular sheltered housing stock.
 - There has not been a robust cost assessment and comparison of the Council's housing service.
 - There have been no value for money assessments for the housing service and no overall focus on ensuring value for money.
- 7 There are some positive features to the services provided. These are as follows.
- There has been a corporate focus on improving the way that customers can access services, with a new customer services one stop shop facility and call centre developed at the main offices of the Council in Loughborough.
 - The Council has now developed a stock improvement programme that is focussed on meeting the DHS and this has been operating for the last 18 months.
 - The Council has focussed on improving the rate at which it repairs and relets void properties and the time scales have improved significantly from 55 days to 25 days to repair and relet.
 - Three street wardens have been employed to assist in managing estates and deterring and preventing low level anti-social behaviour.
 - Estates are well kept and tidy.
 - Some of the unpopular sheltered housing stock has been converted and the limited conversion of unpopular sheltered stock is of a good quality.

- 8 We judged that the service has promising prospects for improvement. The Council can demonstrate a range of improvements including the following.
- There has been significant improvement in performance in repairing and reletting properties.
 - There has been corporate investment in developing customer reception facilities at the Council's main building which has improved access.
 - The floating support service is providing an effective service which is assisting tenants in sustaining their tenancies.
 - There have been good improvements to some of the unpopular sheltered stock.
 - Trainers have been engaged to work with residents to develop their skills, confidence and ability to be effectively involved in service improvement.
 - There is a clear commitment and willingness to developing a more customer focussed service in the housing department but this has not yet delivered outcomes that tenants will notice.
 - Considerable resources and effort have been successfully applied to develop and agree the strategic focus of housing and the stock options appraisal has been completed and the housing strategy and business plans are fit for purpose.
 - The Council has recognised that the improvement plans that it had in place to develop the repairs and maintenance service have not been effective and has refocused this work.
 - Clear objectives to move towards an ALMO and become a three-star, excellent service have been agreed and a robust project management framework put in place to manage service improvements.
 - The Council has moved effectively to address the problems of skills and capacity gaps in the repairs and maintenance service.
- 9 However there are still barriers to service's prospects for improvement.
- The council has not addressed the poor performance of the repairs service.
 - The service is poor at engaging with housing customers and poor areas of customer care have not been addressed.
 - The performance management process is currently undermined by flawed performance information.
 - The direction of travel for key performance indicators show that the Council is not achieving sustained improvements for the housing service.
 - The plans to address the value for money issues are only recently agreed and have yet to have any outcomes for the service.
 - The IT systems for the service are not fit for purpose.

Recommendations

- 10 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access to services and standards of customer care by:

- *introducing a SMART, customer focussed strategy and action in consultation with residents;*
- *developing service standards with customers and widely publicising them;*
- *developing effective and integrated IT systems to ensure that customers are offered appointments for the service and that their queries can be responded to;*
- *developing an effective system of assessing customer satisfaction;*
- *review arrangements and facilities at the customer service centre and call centre to provide a consistently high customer service;*
- *improving the performance of communication with customers via the call centre;*
- *ensuring leaflets, policies and surveys are relevant to all customers and consistently include strap lines in different languages and formats making it clear what the contents are;*
- *developing a tenants handbook with tenants, including clear repairs information;*
- *ensuring that the complaints procedure is consistently applied across the service and effectively responds to the needs of residents. Improve the awareness of the complaints procedure; and*
- *developing and publicising a clear policy on aids and adaptations and monitoring progress on requests.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction;
- improving access to information for customers;
- improved efficiency of the repairs service through an appointments system;

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high costs is over 5 per cent.

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- delivery of equitable services for all, including residents from BME groups and with diverse needs;
- improving residents' awareness of the availability of aids and adaptations; and
- more systematic approach to assessing the needs of residents and customers.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and medium costs.

This should be implemented by October 2006.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the responsive repairs service by:

- *ensuring that all gas appliances are serviced annually;*
- *reviewing, with tenants, the response categories for all non urgent repairs;*
- *undertaking a whole systems analysis of the repairs service with tenants: from the point at which tenants report a repair, to the repair being delivered, to identify and remove all barriers to communication, all inefficiencies and all duplicated activity;*
- *introducing accurate performance monitoring so that the real performance of the service is known;*
- *installing a single and integrated IT system that captures all repairs activity across the service and which can be accessed across the service and remotely by staff inspecting and undertaking repairs;*
- *developing an appointments system, in consultation with tenants, that is offered at when a repair is reported for all non urgent repairs;*
- *training call centre staff in repairs diagnosis to improve the accuracy of repairs reporting;*
- *analysing and taking action to address the barriers to recruitment and retention of staff;*
- *reviewing the schedule of rates and developing composite repairs orders to assist staff to complete a repair on the first visit;*
- *developing an effective repairs variation process that allows staff to focus on completing a repair at the first visit; and*
- *developing a multi skilled work force.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer satisfaction;
- improved customer care;
- a significantly more efficient and cost effective repairs service; and

- accurate performance information which will assist staff to identify problems and take action to resolve them.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and low costs as the review of the service will realise real cost savings that can be invested in improving the service.

This should be implemented by February 2007.

Recommendation

R3 Improve access to all services for residents with diverse needs by:

- *developing systems to accurately capture information and knowledge on the vulnerability and diverse needs of residents;*
- *thoroughly appraise all services to ensure that they are able to respond effectively to the diverse needs of tenants;*
- *ensuring that all staff have training in delivering services to diverse communities;*
- *developing and implementing a SMART Diversity Strategy action plan in consultation with customers and community groups;*
- *developing community cohesion practices and policies with residents and key partners;*
- *ensuring there are challenging targets in place for lettings and allocations for tenants with diverse needs, which are monitored and reported on; and*
- *ensuring that there are targets in place to develop a workforce that is representative of Charnwood's communities, which are monitored and reported on.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- redesigned services that can respond effectively to all customers;
- providing all customers with good customer care by providing services that meet their specific needs; and
- increased ability to learn from tenants and meet their changing needs.

The implementation of this recommendation would have medium impact and low costs.

This should be implemented by September 2006.

Recommendation

R4 Engage tenants in the development and monitoring of the service by:

- *developing a range of different ways that tenants can be involved;*
- *promoting these to tenants;*
- *taking steps to engage with more difficult to reach tenants;*
- *training all staff so that they understand the benefits of engaging with tenants; and*
- *training tenants to ensure that they have the skills and capacity to assist in the management and development of the service.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a service that is customer focussed; and
- an improved service that is led by customers' priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and medium costs.

This should be implemented by July 2006.

Recommendation

R5 Ensure that homes are improved to the DHS by 2010 by:

- *carrying out a comprehensive stock condition survey;*
- *developing an IT based system of holding stock condition information that can be updated by repairs and maintenance information and accessed across the service; and*
- *developing detailed stock investment short, medium and long term plans to improve tenants' homes.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improvements needed to tenants homes will be clearly identified; and
- the service will have accurate and up to date information on the repair and improvement needs of the housing stock which will enable it to develop investment plans.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and medium costs.

This should be implemented by July 2006.

Recommendation

R6 Strengthen the approach to efficiency and value for money by:

- *implementing SMART Value for Money and Procurement Strategies in consultation with customers;*
- *developing systems for analysis of unit costs and external benchmarking against external organisations for all services;*
- *developing modern procurement methods for the delivery of the repairs and maintenance service; and*
- *developing Service Level Agreements for all services provided to the housing service to ensure they provide value for money.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a significantly more efficient and cost effective service;
- improved accountability for service delivery;
- enhanced financial scrutiny and control; and
- more informed managerial responses to weak performance.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and low costs with the potential for savings.

This should be implemented by July 2006.

Recommendation

R7 Strengthen the approach to performance monitoring and management by:

- *developing more robust monitoring arrangements for all key service areas;*
- *ensuring that all service standards are routinely monitored and performance is reported to customers and members;*
- *improving the quality and timeliness of rents performance information; and*
- *routinely presenting information on central services costs and performance to tenants and members.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more opportunities to improve services based on customer feedback;
- improved accountability for service delivery;
- enhanced financial scrutiny and control; and
- more informed managerial responses to weak performance.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and low costs.

Recommendation

R8 Strengthen the approach to service and improvement planning by:

- *ensuring that all service reviews fully reflect Best Value principles;*
- *ensuring that all service and improvement plans are SMART; and*
- *routinely benchmarking costs and quality with comparable organisations.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased ability to respond to the changing needs of customers;
- increased ability to identify and implement options for improvement; and
- more informed organisational responses to weak performance.

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and low costs, with the potential for savings.

This should be implemented by July 2006.

Recommendation

R9 Take action to address all other weaknesses identified in this report.

Recommendation

R10 Submit this report to the Council's cabinet and the tenants' forums.

- 11 We would like to thank the staff of Charnwood Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 16 - 29 January 2006

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Report

Context

The locality

- 12 Borough of Charnwood is a district council in Leicestershire in the East Midlands. The population is 153,500 of which 10.8 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.
- 13 The Borough is home to Loughborough University which means that there is a high percentage of students living in the area - 9.7 per cent.
- 14 The council is led by a joint Labour and Liberal administration. Of the 52 seats 24 are Conservative, 22 Labour and 6 Liberal Democrat.
- 15 The council employs 613.5 full time equivalent staff across all services.
- 16 In terms of deprivation, Charnwood ranks 257th out of 354 areas of England, where 1 is the most deprived. Unemployment is lower than the regional and national average at 1.6 per cent of the working population.
- 17 The Audit Commission assessed the overall services of the Borough as fair as part of the comprehensive performance assessment of the Council which took place in 2005, but the housing service was rated as weak and at high risk of not achieving the Government's Decent Homes Standard by the target date of 2010.

The service

- 18 The housing service manages 6,000 council homes of which; 1,802 are low rise two storey flats; 564 are bungalows and 354 are bedsits. The council owns and manages 800 garages and there are 260 leaseholders.
- 19 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) income for 2005/06 is £12.821 million. The HRA capital programme for 2006/06 amounts to £3.855 million.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 20 The Corporate Objectives are defined in the Council's Corporate Plan, 'Leading in Leicestershire', which was adopted in 2005. The Plan has an overarching priority:
- 'Ensuring the Borough is recognised as Leading in Leicestershire for the quality of its living environment for all'.
- 21 Six corporate aims have been identified to support the achievement of this priority:
- A Sustainable Environment;
 - A Clean, Safe and Healthy Environment;
 - Leisure and Cultural Opportunities for All;
 - Decent Homes and Neighbourhoods;
 - An Economically Prosperous Environment; and
 - An Excellent Council.
- 22 The priorities for the housing service are:
- that the Council's housing stock meets the Decent Homes Standard;
 - recognition of improved service quality and performance through the achievement of at least two-star status for the Housing Service;
 - to improve the quality of housing advice across the Borough to enable people to make informed and realistic choices with regard to their housing needs;
 - to increase the supply of affordable homes in the Borough;
 - to minimise homelessness within the Borough whilst improving the service to those who become homeless; and
 - to reduce levels of anti-social behaviour.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Access and customer care

- 23 There is insufficient focus on gaining customer input to housing services in Charnwood and as a result the service is not customer focussed and is not driven by providing the service that the customers would like to see.

- 24 Service users and stakeholders are not involved in evaluating the housing service and determining priorities and standards. There are service standards for a number of housing's service areas, but these were not agreed with tenants and are not available for customers, so that they are unaware of the standard of service they can expect to receive. The service standards are also not monitored which means that Charnwood Borough Council (CBC) is also unaware of whether these standards are being achieved.
- 25 There is inadequate monitoring and reporting of how easy it is to access housing services. Performance information about customer access to services is not routinely collected and reported to senior officers and councillors. This means that there is limited focus on improving access for customers and the service is unable to identify customers who are not accessing services.
- 26 CBC cannot demonstrate how information it holds about its housing customers and their views is used to plan or prioritise services in a strategic way. Although a variety of customer information is collected by housing, this information is not then used to assist service planning. CBC is missing the opportunity to utilise the variety of household and demographic information that is held on housing systems to develop services to meet its customers' needs.
- 27 There has been a corporate focus on improving the way that customers can access services, with a new customer services one stop shop facility developed at the main offices of the Council in Loughborough. The facility has improved the access to the council building for housing customers as the new reception area is now on the ground floor and accessible to customers with mobility and sensory impairments. The housing service, however, continues to publicise a variety of different telephone numbers for tenants to contact the service, rather than promoting the number of the call centre and customer service centre. This is potentially confusing for customers and undermines the one stop shop approach that the Council is trying to achieve corporately.
- 28 The customer services centre has insufficient information available for housing customers and customers are not always offered privacy to discuss confidential issues. Leaflets were provided about housing on an information carousel, but this was placed away from the main reception in an area where customers could not see it and so would not be able to use it. Although the customer services centre has confidential interview rooms in which to interview housing customers, we observed a number of confidential discussions being held with housing customers in the main waiting area. The content of these discussions was easily overheard by all other customers waiting to be seen by staff.
- 29 Information about the number of people using the customer reception, the topic of their enquiries etc. is being recorded. This recording is however, relatively recent and no service changes or improvements have yet resulted from analysis of this information.

- 30 Access to the housing service by telephone has not been designed to meet customers' needs. CBC have developed a Call Centre for the housing service which is open from 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 1pm on Saturdays, making it easy for tenants who work full time to contact the service but the facility is hampered by the lack of integrated technology. This means that Call Centre staff have difficulty in giving detailed information to callers as the Call Centre's IT system is not integrated with Housing's IT systems. The Call Centre is unable to give tenants appointments for repairs or give callers any information about the progress of a repair as they are unable to access the IT system of the DLO, who operates the repairs service. Access to the repairs service is considered in more detail in the responsive repairs section of this report below.
- 31 Housing services are not shaped around customer convenience rather the services are shaped around the internal communication structures of the Council and the lack of capacity at the DLO. The lack of integrated IT means that customers cannot be provided easily with information about services they require and the fragmented nature of some areas of service delivery, such as repairs, means that tenants cannot be offered appointments. If a tenant is not in when the repairs staff have called twice, then the job is cancelled. Tenants are not informed that their repairs request has been cancelled and only when they phone in to enquire about the repair are they informed about the cancellation. The repair is then re-ordered, meaning that tenants can have a further lengthy wait for the repairs to be done.
- 32 Customers can access some of housing services through the internet, for instance tenants can pay their rent on line. However, many of the forms and information provided are not in an interactive form, which lessens the convenience of accessing the service on line.
- 33 Tenants can also access the service through contact with housing employees; the housing service employs three full time and one part time rent collectors and three street wardens but it is not made clear to tenants that they can contact these staff for information or assistance.
- 34 Leaflets and information about housing services are not easily available to customers. There is no tenants' handbook or repairs handbook to assist tenants' access to services.
- 35 Satisfaction of tenants of council housing with the overall service provided by their landlord as measured by the STATUS independent survey is low at 77 per cent. This is poor performance when compared to other similar local authorities. CBC had set a target of 85 per cent but there are no action plans in place to develop tenants' satisfaction and the Council have not discussed plans to improve this with tenants. Tenant satisfaction with the overall service is lower for black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants at 73 per cent. There are no action plans agreed to develop BME tenant satisfaction.

- 36 Staff are customer focussed. They show an awareness of the need to respond to individuals needs and to listen to what customers are asking for. They are also clear that, if CBC cannot help, they either refer or signpost customers to other agencies and/or facilitate that contact themselves. We observed staff responding politely and appropriately to calls from customers. However, CBC staff are not adequately supported to enable them to respond to the diverse needs of customers. For example, staff do not have clear guidance about agencies or contacts who may be able to assist them, for instance, when they encounter customers who may have mental health problems. In practice, staff are clear that amongst their colleagues there is a wide range of knowledge about such contacts and that they would be able to access such assistance if they needed it. Clear written guidance would, however, assist new staff and would ensure that help was not dependent on particular colleagues being available.
- 37 Written complaints about the services that the housing department manage are dealt with in a prompt and effective manner. Written complaints about the housing service are dealt with under the corporate complaints procedures All letters were sympathetic, to the point and the initial response letter repeated the nature and understanding of the complaint so that tenant could note if anything was incorrect. Leaflets about the complaints procedures are included in replies to complainants informing them how to pursue their complaint if they are not satisfied with the response. However, the complaints IT system is a stand alone one and does not produce reports within it, so information not easily available to inform officers about what is not working effectively. A manual collation done on a weekly basis.
- 38 The repairs service is not learning from complaints made by tenants about its service. The repairs service operated by the DLO does not use the corporate complaints system and no complaints procedure about the repairs service is promoted to tenants. Telephone complaints from tenants about the repairs service are not recorded.
- 39 The results of the complaints process are not publicised to customers and the housing service is not able to demonstrate to tenants how it is learning from complaints. Tenants are not involved in monitoring performance on complaints or identifying ways to improve the service as a result of complaints received.

Diversity

- 40 There hasn't been a focus on ensuring that the housing service is able to respond to the diverse needs of its customers. The housing service is not meeting all its legislative requirements and the service is unable to demonstrate that it understands and responds to the diverse needs of its customers.
- 41 There has been a lack leadership at Charnwood Borough Council in promoting equal opportunities and ensuring that services meet the diverse needs of customers. This has been recognised at a corporate level and there has been an increased focus at a corporate level on equalities and diversity. Consultants have reviewed the policies and procedures for equalities and diversity and advised that many of these need to be reviewed.

The Council is redrafting all equalities and diversity work and developing corporate action plans which will then translate into service action plans. All Housing staff have undertaken diversity training but this has not been extended to the staff at the DLO who deliver the responsive repairs service.

- 42 CBC's staff profile, particularly at a senior level, does not reflect the diverse community that CBC serves and there have been limited plans to address this to date. Funding has however, recently been approved to seek ways in which this can be addressed but the plans for this are not yet agreed.
- 43 The housing service is not meeting all legislative requirements. There has been no equalities impact assessment undertaken for the housing service. This is a statutory requirement that should have been undertaken in 2005.
- 44 External contactors are not monitored to ensure that they are complying with equal opportunities legislation, and so the Council is unable to demonstrate that contractors who carry out services on its behalf are complying with legislative requirements.
- 45 The Council is unable to demonstrate that it understands and is responding to the diverse needs of its housing services customers. There is no flagging system on the call centre screens to highlight communication or other needs that customers may have such as mobility or hearing problems, although the software can provide this facility. Leaflets and information are not designed to meet all customers' needs. There are no language strap lines on publications advertising that they are available in other languages or other formats such as larger print. The Council subscribes to Language Line, an instant translation facility, but this service is not promoted effectively and so customers are not aware of this facility and there has been almost no use of the service to date.
- 46 CBC does not know how complete its tenant profile is and therefore does not have information available about the needs of all vulnerable service users. While the housing service collects information from new tenants and has a range of information on individual tenancy records, it cannot say how complete the information is or where the gaps are. The information that is held is used on an individual, case by case basis, but this information is not used strategically to shape services or to plan communication. There is no clear plan in place to complete the profile, although the tenancy management team intend to re-introduce tenancy audits. CBC therefore cannot be sure that services and information are tailored to meet customer needs.
- 47 CBC is not flexible enough in ensuring that it is meeting vulnerable customers in arrears needs. While CBC has a relatively supportive approach to those who are receiving tenancy support and works with the support provider to address the arrears issue, partners identify that the approach can be less flexible where there are no formal support arrangements and support needs can be identified relatively late in the recovery process.
- 48 The Council has assessed its public buildings to ensure that it meets the legislative requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. A schedule of works has been identified and adjustments carried out to ensure that the Council's public offices are accessible.

- 49 Sheltered schemes are not assessed to see if they are meeting the standards required by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Although this is not a statutory requirement, it is good practice for accommodation specifically designed for older people to consider access issues for people with mobility problems. We visited schemes that have heavy double entrance doors that have to be opened manually and with trip hazards in the entrance lobbies. The schemes have first floor flats that cannot be accessed by a lift. As a result there are long term voids in some schemes. The Council is taking some action to tackle this (this is discussed in the Supported Housing section of the report below), but there has been no cost benefit analysis of installing lifts at these schemes.
- 50 The housing service has had limited engagement with service users or community organisations in developing services. There is a wide network of community organisations in the Charnwood area which the Council could consult about developing services to make them more appropriate to meet customers' cultural and diversity needs, but this opportunity has not been explored by housing to date.
- 51 There are limited measures in place to respond to racial harassment and no clear message publicised on the stance taken by the Council in this regard. Staff have had some training as part of the overall anti-social behaviour procedure training and diversity training but none specifically relating to racial harassment. Housing management staff are relatively poorly informed about locally agencies which can assist with cases of harassment and are unaware as to whether CBC is a race hate reporting centre³. There are targets in place for response to racial harassment but these are not monitored. Activity and performance information relating to racial harassment are not routinely reported as part of performance reports. In addition, publicity about CBC's stance on racial harassment is extremely limited. All of these factors combined mean that vulnerable tenants may be unaware that CBC can assist in cases of racial harassment and are unlikely to receive an effective response.
- 52 The Council and housing service's stance towards not tolerating domestic violence is clear and there is clear information available to customers about how the service will respond to assist victims of domestic violence and customers are well sign posted towards links with advice agencies.
- 53 There has been very limited consideration of how the housing service can respond to the needs of the BME communities in Charnwood and there are no future plans agreed to develop the service to meet the needs of BME communities. The Council has set a target for the production of a BME housing strategy by the end of April 2006 but only limited work has started to undertake this. The development of the BME strategy has not been prioritised by the housing service. The initial date for completion of the BME housing strategy has been delayed from its original target of 2002.

³ A race hate reporting centre is a place where staff are trained to sensitively and effectively respond to reports of race hate. The reporting centre will also have clear arrangements with other agencies, such as the police to enable them to respond effectively to race hate incidents.

- 54 The Housing Act 2004 requires all local authorities to carry out a needs assessment for the housing requirement of Gypsies and Irish travellers. CBC is working with the other local authorities in Leicestershire to complete a county wide needs assessment. The completion times for this needs' assessment is expected to be March 2007.
- 55 The housing service employs a full time Occupational Therapist to assist them to make assessments of tenants' aids and adaptation needs. The details of this service are outlined in more detail in the Aids and Adaptations section of this report.

Stock investment

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical works

- 56 CBC has not carried out systematic investment in the housing stock and there are not currently any agreed investment programmes to ensure that the Council meets the decent homes standard (DHS) by 2010. The way that CBC collects stock condition information about its housing stock is too limited to give the Council sufficiently detailed information to enable CBC to effectively plan and commission contracts for improvements to tenants' homes and the housing service is not receiving a value for money service from the Council's current contract procurement methods.
- 57 CBC has not carried out systematic investment in the housing stock in the past. All capital receipts received from the sale of assets from the housing stock have gone to the general fund. The result is that many homes in Charnwood do not meet the decent homes standard (DHS) which is the standard that the Government requires that all council homes should be improved to by 2010. Thirty seven per cent of CBC council homes currently do not meet this standard, although this is an improvement from the position last year when 44 per cent of homes failed to meet the DHS.
- 58 The Council has now developed an improvement programme that is focussed on meeting the DHS and this has been operating for the last eighteen months. The capital programme is now prioritising carrying out DHS work to low demand properties; hard to let bedsits and neighbourhood renewal schemes in less desirable areas in order to reduce the numbers of properties that are vacant. The bedsit conversions carried out in sheltered schemes, to convert unpopular bedsits with shared facilities to two-bedroomed flats, have been carried out to a good standard. A cost benefit analysis has been carried out to support the investment in these properties which has demonstrated that the investment will be returned in full by rental income over three years.
- 59 The way that CBC collects stock condition information about its housing stock is too limited to give the Council sufficiently detailed information to enable CBC to effectively plan and commission contracts for improvements to tenants' homes. A stock condition survey was undertaken in 2003, but only 10 per cent of properties were surveyed. This information was insufficient to be able to accurately use it over the different types of stock in Charnwood.

The way that new stock condition information is collected is also inefficient and stock information is held on separate data bases and manually updated and so therefore of limited use to planning as this is not easily accessed.

- 60 The Council has embarked on a DHS survey of all of its stock but this information is being collected separately and the information is fragmented. Design Services (part of the Property Services section) are collecting stock condition information on the internal compliance of homes with the DHS, whilst repairs inspectors (part of Housing services) are collecting external stock condition information. There is no business case to support this inefficient and fragmented way of collecting stock condition information. The Council also misses the opportunity to update stock condition information from the repairs service. This is because the IT systems for repairs are not compatible with the systems that hold the stock condition information.
- 61 There is insufficient information held about the presence of asbestos to maintain an accurate asbestos register. This lack of knowledge has led to increased costs for the capital programme which has been delayed because of the discovery of asbestos, that the Council was unaware of, in homes which were due to be improved in this financial year. This has reduced the resources available and delayed the programmes to improve tenants' homes.
- 62 There are not currently any agreed investment programmes to ensure that the Council meets the DHS by 2010. The Council has recently carried out a detailed stock options appraisal to consider the way that the DHS can be met. The stock options appraisal concluded that there are insufficient funds to meet the DHS within the Council's own resources and so it has decided to create an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) and apply to central government for the additional resources available. The Council is early in this process and so has not yet submitted a section 27 application detailing its plans for stock and service improvement. Any agreement regarding additional resources requires that the Council can establish that it is running a good, two-star housing service.
- 63 CBC has consulted tenants on developing a higher standard of home improvement than the minimum set by the Government's DHS but this has not led to any agreed higher standard. This consultation took place as part of the stock options appraisal in 2005. CBC have not yet however analysed the costs of improving all homes to a higher DHS nor has there been any decision taken as to whether future improvements will incorporate this higher standard. Tenants have not been kept informed about the results of this consultation.
- 64 The council has a five-year maintenance programme, which is an annual rolling programme across the Borough, which is divided into five areas. The maintenance programme considers external repairs and maintenance only, such as painting, guttering and roof repairs.

- 65 There has not been a consistent investment in improving the thermal warmth of tenants' homes, which would make it cheaper for tenants to heat their homes. The Council has improved the thermal warmth of some tenants' homes, through the replacement of windows with upvc double glazing, new central heating and loft insulation. This programme has not, however, been comprehensive and many homes have poor thermal warmth. CBC's performance information states the thermal warmth rating for council homes is 63, on a SAP rating of 1 to 100, but this figure has not been correctly collected and so is not reliable. When repairs to windows are undertaken, individual double glazed units are fitted, meaning that homes can have one or two upvc double glazed units but the rest of the windows are the original frames. This is not an effective way of replacing windows and leaves tenants with unsightly homes.
- 66 The housing service is not receiving a value for money service from the Council's current contract procurement methods. There is no business case for the use of the Design Services section of the Council, who currently act as a contractor for Housing in terms of letting and supervising the DH programme. However, the staffing resources of Design Services are not sufficient to supervise and deliver the decent homes programme and the value for money of this arrangement had not been subject to market testing. Housing pay a six per cent fee to Design Services but currently in addition to this fee, are also paying for agency staff to cover vacancies in the Design Services team (three vacancies in a team of five). The money to pay for agency staff is coming from the major repairs allowance. This does not represent an effective use of resources that are supposed to go to improve tenants' homes.
- 67 Design Services did not procure contractors to deliver the Decent Homes improvement programme effectively. Design Services let the contract to the Council's DLO, but without a robust assessment of the DLO's capacity to deliver the works. The DLO had insufficient resources to be able to deliver the contract and the contract has had to be terminated and re let. This has led to further delays to carrying out improvements to tenants' homes and additional administrative costs.
- 68 CBC has not yet developed effective partnership arrangements in the area of repairs and maintenance. It has commissioned consultants, who have carried out some early work outlining possible options, but it has not yet devised partnership documentation or specifications. CBC is therefore not benefiting from some of the economies that can be achieved through partnering arrangements.
- 69 Decent homes works are now delivered by an external company. They employ a Tenant Liaison Officer to consult with tenants about the plans to improve their homes and the layout of kitchens and bathrooms. The external contractor is part of the considerate contractor scheme and boards advertising that they are part of this code of good practice are well displayed. The works areas were well managed.

- 70 Tenants have not been consulted on the overall range of choice of fixtures and fittings when their kitchens and bathrooms are replaced. There is a limited choice of fittings for tenants (four doors, four worktops, two lino styles for floors, two wall papers).

Responsive repairs

- 71 The responsive repairs system is poor and has no focus on customer care. It is fragmented and inefficient with management and service delivery responsibly split across separate sections of the Council. This fragmentation leads directly to poor communication, poor tenant customer care and inconvenience, duplication and poor value for money.
- 72 The repairs service is not designed to meet the needs of customers. There are no appointments offered for repairs and the categories for completion of repairs are very lengthy. These have been further lengthened, without consultation with tenants, to accommodate the needs of the DLO which carried out the responsive repairs service. Repair jobs are cancelled without tenants being informed that the job has been cancelled and tenants cannot find out from the repairs call centre what the progress is on repairs they have requested.
- 73 There is no appointments process for repairs. Tenants are told the category of repair when they phone the call centre and the target date for completion. The agreed procedure at the DLO is that they then ring up tenants when they are due to carry out the repair, but this is not recorded and so CBC does not know if this is happening or how many tenants are contacted in this way. Many repairs are carried out on a cold call basis. If tenants are not in when operatives or repairs inspectors call, a slip is left but if tenants don't respond to this or the subsequent letter, then the job is cancelled. Tenants are not informed that their repair has been cancelled and if they telephone to enquire about the repair, then the job is re ordered as a new job, meaning that tenants have to wait again for operatives to call.
- 74 There has been no consideration of the needs of tenants who are not at home in the day time. Operatives are only available to carry out non urgent repairs from Monday to Friday from 8am to 4pm (3.30pm on Fridays). No out hours service for non urgent repairs is provided, which means that tenants have to take time off work to wait in for operatives to call. As there are no appointments offered, tenants are unable to predict when operatives will call and so are unlikely to be in, creating further delays and barriers to having their repairs carried out.
- 75 The target times for completion of non emergency repairs are not focused on tenants needs. The timescales for completion of non urgent repairs are very lengthy and have not been set in consultation with tenants. The time categories for priority repairs are three to ten working days. This can include plumbing leaks and failed lighting. The target times for non urgent repairs are very lengthy at 40 working days (eight weeks). The timescales for completing these repairs has been lengthened to accommodate the lack of capacity at the DLO. Again tenants were not consulted about these changes. This is a poor standard of service.

- 76 The repairs service is performing poorly against the targets set. Performance information shows that the repairs service is not managing to meet these very lengthy targets (only 82 per cent completed within the 40 day target), but the situation is much worse than the recorded information shows. The information is not being recorded accurately and so the Council and tenants have no factual picture of the effectiveness of the repairs service. The accuracy of the performance information is flawed in a number of ways.
- If tenants are not in when operatives call, jobs are cancelled. The number of times this happens is not monitored or reported. If the tenant enquires about the cancelled repair, this is then re-ordered as a new repair. The time taken to complete the repair should have been shown against the initial order as this shows how long it has actually taken for the repair to be completed.
 - The DLO is allowed to alter the timescales to longer than the 40 days (in agreement with the housing service) if they are having difficulty in completion of the repair. These jobs not shown against the new longer targets, but as being done within target. Tenants are not informed that the target time for their repair has been altered.
 - If a repair is pre-inspected (and a large number are) then the time taken to complete the repair is shown against when the inspector raises the repair, not against the time that the tenant reported it. This adds days to the timescales but this is not recorded.
 - If a job is complex and requires more than one trade operative to complete it then a new repair job is ordered per trade. So a non urgent repair requiring two different operatives to complete it will have two separate repairs raised for the same job, meaning that tenants face a wait of eight weeks for each part of the repair (up to 16 weeks). The DLO does not operate a multi- skilled work force. As each part of the job is recorded against a different start date, the actual time the job has taken is not recorded.
 - The performance information for repairs is collected separately by the housing service and the DLO and the information is held on separate and non integrated IT systems. The information held by the housing service shows that many repairs jobs are not completed within the target times, including emergency repairs. The information held by the DLO gives a different picture, but neither system held accurate information as the jobs are shown as complete only when they have been invoiced for, rather than when they are actually done. This means that the Council cannot be sure that emergency and other repairs are actually being carried out.
- 77 The telephone call centre is open from 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and on Saturday mornings, offering flexible times for tenants to report repairs, and staff are helpful and polite to customers when they call. However, the service that staff are able to offer tenants is hampered by the lack of integrated technology. The call centre staff are unable to access the IT systems of housing or the DLO to report repairs, or find out the progress of repairs for tenants.

As the call centre was created specifically for housing (currently it deals with housing and cleansing calls) there has been a lack of integrated planning and systems analysis in its development which has left the call centre unable to offer a full service to tenants.

- 78** Tenants calling the call centre experience delays in calls being answered. The call centre has effective monitoring technology and call times and missed calls are regularly monitored. This monitoring shows that callers can wait up to 2.35 minutes for calls to be answered and that many callers abandon their attempt to get through to operators; 16.7 per cent in November 2005.
- 79** The system for reporting repairs is leading to inaccurate repairs diagnosis and this is leading to increased inconvenience for tenants and poor value for money. Staff at the council call centre do not receive training in repairs reporting and they have no access to technical advisors. There is also a high turnover of staff at the call centre, which means that staff knowledge that is built up, is lost. There is no diagnostic software in place, just software that leads staff to the relevant schedule of rates. Tenants also don't have any diagnostic tools to help them report a repair correctly. This lack of training and assistance in identifying the repair correctly leads to inaccurate repairs reports. This results in high variation orders, high pre-inspection visits and the Council failing to complete the job right first time, on the first visit, creating inconvenience to tenants who have to be in several times for a repair to be completed. The highest number of variations per call centre staff is not monitored. This information would help the Council as it would indicate which staff may need more training.
- 80** There are high numbers of variation orders which is poor value for money and the system for agreeing these is inflexible, lacks any customer focus and is costing the service unnecessary costs in terms of duplicate inspection and multiple visits to complete the repair. The Council does not have an accurate picture of the numbers of variation orders but staff regard the numbers as being high and in excess of 10 per cent. If an operative discovers that the job is not as has been reported, the job is not undertaken. The operative then has to request a variation order. This request goes to a supervisor in DLO, then back to an inspector in housing, before a decision can be made. This duplication is a waste of resources and very poor customer care adding delays to the time it takes to complete a repair.
- 81** There is a high level of pre-inspection (16.21 per cent) which is poor value for money. The Audit Commission recommends an upper limit of 10 per cent pre-inspection. High levels of pre-inspection are symptomatic of a repairs system that has poor repairs reporting systems. The policy is for all jobs over £250 to be pre inspected but inaccurate repairs reporting is leading to repairs of less than £250 being inspected keeping the level of pre-inspections high and creating unnecessary costs to the service. The requirement that so many repairs orders are pre-inspected means that tenants are further inconvenienced by having to be in when an inspector calls, in addition to waiting in for the operatives to complete the repair. The pre-inspection process is more customer focussed with AM and PM appointments being offered to tenants by the call centre staff.

- 82 There are a very high number of separate schedules (over 2,000) in the schedule of rates (SOR). This means that the repairs are not considered as a whole, but are ordered by separate and fragmented orders. There has been no review of the SOR to develop more composite repairs orders that allow operatives more flexibility and increases their ability to complete repairs on the first visit. The lack of composite SOR leads in turn to higher variation orders, more tenant inconvenience and increased costs.
- 83 The percentage of emergency repairs is high at 22 per cent - the audit commission recommends a good practice guideline of 10 per cent. High levels of emergency repairs are common where there is poor repairs diagnosis and where tenants face long waits for non urgent repairs to be carried out. There is a call out charge of an extra £25 for each call out to an emergency repair, which brings increased costs to the service.
- 84 There is no IT link with the out-of-hours service and this has led to call outs for repairs to properties that no longer belong to CBC. This also means that the out-of-hours service is unable to see what repairs reporting activity there has been to a property in the day time or access any information about tenants. We tested the out-of-hours service and found that a non urgent repair was treated as urgent although we made no request that the repair being treated as such. This is poor value for money for the service with high costs being paid to undertake repairs.
- 85 The DLO has staff recruitment and retention difficulties and there is a high turnover of staff, with many agency staff being used to cover vacancies. Basic pay and bonus rates are low which leads to difficulties in recruitment. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the agency staff are paid more than council's operatives.
- 86 The operatives are paid on a bonus system. As some jobs are worth more than others, these are prioritised by operatives to maximise their income. There is no system in place to ensure that the less valuable jobs are completed effectively. The performance information system is so poor, however, it is difficult to see the exact extent of the effect of this on repairs performance.
- 87 Invoices are not paid in a timely and efficient manner. The speed at which invoices are processed is not monitored as part of the suite of management information reports. Housing staff report significant delays in invoicing, as the invoices are not received in a timely manner from the DLO. Invoices are processed twice, by the DLO and by Housing. This is an unnecessary waste of resources and is not value for money.
- 88 The repairs satisfaction surveys are not designed effectively and this means that CBC is not getting the information it needs from them. The first question asks 'are you satisfied with the repair, yes or no', tenants are only asked for supplementary information if they say no. A tenant could well be satisfied with the actual repair but unhappy with other aspects but the form discourages them from saying this.

- 89 Performance information is not produced for key service areas for instance: the numbers of repairs jobs cancelled through 'non access'; the number of cold call visits where tenants are not in; the number of repeat visits to gain access for the pre-inspection and repair; and the number of variation orders. This means that the Council is unable to use performance information to analyse where the repairs service is not operating effectively.
- 90 Tenants are not involved in the monitoring of the repairs service and no performance information is given to them about the service.
- 91 CBC cannot demonstrate value for money in the repairs and maintenance service. It has not explored what the market can offer and has extended the contract with the DLO despite the fact that performance is poor. This means that resources are not being used as effectively as they could be to provide services for tenants.
- 92 The Council has not effectively challenged the current performance of the DLO in respect of the housing repairs service. Failure to do this has resulted in a relatively poor service being provided to customers for some time and continued provision of a service that does not represent value for money.

Void repairs

- 93 The Council has focussed in improving the rate at which it repairs and relets void properties and the time scales have improved significantly from 55 days to 25 days to repair and relet. However, this is being achieved by leaving all but essential health and safety repairs to be completed after a tenant has moved in. Tenants were not consulted about this and the post void repairs process is inefficient and not customer focused, with tenants facing very long waits for repairs to be completed and major repairs being carried out causing disruption for tenants.
- 94 The voids process has been reviewed and each stage of the process is monitored and there are weekly meetings of all key staff to ensure progress. The repair categories have been revised to one, three and seven days. Only repairs required to ensure health and safety are done. The remaining repairs are scheduled as post void repairs with a target time of 28 day for these repairs.
- 95 The new re-lettable standard was not agreed with tenants. The way it is drafted is not user friendly and is not aimed at customers. It is a document for officers. This means that tenants cannot tell easily if their homes have been repaired to the standard they could expect.
- 96 The post void repairs process causes inconvenience to tenants in terms of disruption and also through having to be at home so that the repairs can be carried out. The system of carrying out post void repairs was not agreed with tenants. Major repairs can be carried out and if the job requires more than one trade this can mean multiple visits. Different target times are set for each trade visit meaning that tenants can face waits of up to 40 days for each part of the job. The target time for completing post void repairs is 28 days, but CBC cannot monitor this effectively because the performance reports are not accurate.

- 97 CBC has introduced new procedures to recharge tenants for damage to property but there has been very little collected from the recharges made so far. Housing officers now carry out pre-termination inspections as part of the process, which enables them to identify work which may lead to tenants being recharged if it is not addressed. Early inspection also enables CBC to identify features of the property which may require major work or which will help in the pre-allocation of properties. The pre-termination inspection therefore assists the outgoing tenant as well as CBC. The process has been further improved since its introduction, in the light of lessons learned in the early inspections, for example, by improving the recording of the visits.
- 98 However, the process has had limited effect to date; the total cost of recharges raised for void property repairs during 2004/05 was £5,984.44. At the present time £998.64 has been recovered with a further £4985.80 outstanding. This is not value for money and other tenants are having to pay the cost of these repairs through their rents.

Gas servicing

- 99 The Council is not meeting its legal obligations to carry out gas servicing to appliances in tenants homes and this is placing tenants at risk.
- 100 The systems for gas servicing have not been robust meaning that the Council has not held complete and up to date information on which properties have had gas appliances serviced. At the time of our inspection, the Council were unable to provide evidence that 31 properties had ever received a gas service and that a large number (over 100) properties were overdue for a service by over 12 months. The law (Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations) requires that all properties receive a full service check every 12 months to protect the health and safety of tenants, so CBC is failing to meet its statutory obligations and is leaving these tenants at risk.
- 101 The information systems about which properties have received a gas service are not kept fully up to date and so the Council was unable to establish, during our inspection, which properties have received a gas service in the past. Subsequently the Council has been able to demonstrate that all properties on the list of 31 had received at least one gas service inspection, but in a number of these cases this had been as long ago as 1999.
- 102 After the inspection CBC has continued to try and gain access to these 31 properties and has managed to carry out a gas service in a further 23 properties, but still has not gained access to eight properties.
- 103 The process of arranging for gas servicing is not customer focused. Tenants are informed that their homes are due for a gas service via a letter from the gas servicing contractor. Neither this letter nor subsequent reminders highlight effectively that tenants' lives could be at risk if the service is not carried out. Appointments are not offered to tenants. The initial letter states the day that the gas engineer will call but the time tenants are expected to wait in is from 8am to 5pm.

Such a long potential wait is highly inconvenient to many tenants. The Contract that the Council holds with the gas servicing contractor allows for evening and weekend visits, but this is not promoted to tenants.

- 104 The vital importance of allowing the Council to carry out gas servicing is not highlighted effectively to tenants at all stages of the process. Gas servicing is carried out on an area basis and the Council has recently moved to placing adverts in the local press and asking parish councils to display posters, but the areas to be serviced are not targeted with leaflets to each home, highlighting the vital health risks to tenants. The letters from both the gas contractor and the Council do not highlight the key safety aspect until end stages of the access process.
- 105 The Council has recognised that its arrangements for gaining access to properties have not been effective and has reviewed and improved the process. Previously gaining access for gas servicing has been tackled by the property services section of the council with no reference to the housing service. Responsibility for gas repairs and servicing is now fully the responsibility of the housing service and housing officers are now engaged in the process of contacting tenants to arrange access. The Council can demonstrate that this has enabled access to a large number of properties. The Council is also able to demonstrate that it is working hard to gain access to the remaining properties. It has recently revised its non access procedure to encompass court action to seek access, but none of the outstanding cases have yet been to court.
- 106 The Council monitors the quality of the work of the external contractor effectively and the records of required training for gas service engineers are monitored and kept up to date.

Aids and adaptations

- 107 The aids and adaptation service is not promoted effectively to tenants and there are insufficient funds to meet current demand. The service is not monitored effectively so that the Council is unaware of the amount of time that tenants have to wait for adaptations to their homes.
- 108 CBC employs its own Occupational Therapist (OT) to assist the Council in making assessments and reduce the time that tenants have to wait for an assessment before aids and adaptations can be carried out. This service is viewed very positively by tenants.
- 109 The performance information kept by CBC on how long it takes to receive necessary adaptations is not captured effectively as so does not inform CBC of what the full waiting period is from the point at which tenants have requested assistance to the point at which the work is complete. The information only tracks the time from when CBC's OT receives a request. It is not clear how the times of aids and adaptations requests referred to the County by the wardens are captured. The performance information is also effected by the slow process of invoicing between the DLO (who carry out many of the works) and housing. A job is registered as complete when the invoice is received. But it may well be that this information is misleading and the job was completed some time before this.

- 110 Demand is outstripping the budget allocations for aids and adaptations. In 2004/05 the budget set was £300,000 with a further £100,000 identified (from resources identified to enable CBC to carry out DDA works) to ensure that that year's adaptations could be completed from the waiting list. In the current financial year the budget was set at £361,000, less than that of the previous year. In October 2005 only £66.043 of the budget remained to cater for demand for just under six months.
- 111 The aids and adaptations service is not effectively promoted to tenants, so that there may be tenants who are need of this key service who are unaware that the Council will assist them in adapting properties to enable tenants to continue living independently. CBC plans to publish a leaflet in February 2006.
- 112 There are no service standards for the aids and adaptations service given to tenants and so tenants are unable to measure the performance they receive against these. Tenants are not aware of the waiting times for the different aspects of the assessment and the actual work being carried out and there is no information given to tenants on this.
- 113 The Council keeps a register of all adapted properties, to enable it to recycle adaptations. However, the register of adapted properties is kept on a stand alone computer, and cannot be easily accessed by allocations thus undermining the effectiveness of holding this register.

Housing income management

- 114 CBC is not effectively managing rent arrears. Current rent arrears for 2005/06 are higher than those for 2004/05 and 2003/04. Monthly figures are also higher than for previous years in all months following June 2005. The collection level is also not yet meeting the council's year end target. As at December 2005, rent collected as percentage of rent due totalled 97.06 per cent, as against a target for the year of 98.1 per cent. Rent arrears as a percentage of rent debt in December 2005 stood at 3.29 per cent.
- 115 The Council's approach to rent arrears is changing from one which stressed enforcement to one which emphasises early intervention and prevention. This is reflected in the new arrears policy, drafted in December 2005, and this change has been positively recognised by advice agencies who work with the council. Early intervention is likely to have a positive long term impact on the level of arrears, although this is not yet evident.
- 116 The Council does not know customer views about the income management service. It has not regularly sought customer views, although recently it has introduced a customer satisfaction survey, which it issues to complainants/former tenants when a case has been closed. The questions on the survey form primarily cover whether or not the correct procedure has been followed, with only one specific question about customer satisfaction. An opportunity is also given to respondents to comment on how the service could be improved, but key areas are missed, such as reference to support provided, how easy it was to access the service etc.

The survey will assist CBC in a limited way to identify service weaknesses and whether or not staff are following agreed procedures, but would gain more knowledge about the service if it sought more specific feedback on areas of satisfaction.

- 117** The Council has not effectively involved stakeholders in production and presentation of customer information. Staff at The Bridge (a local advice agency) have had some input into standard letters but, for example, have not been consulted about rent increase letters. Effective consultation with agencies which advise customers could help CBC to ensure that their literature is clear and customer friendly.
- 118** Information provided to customers about the rents service is incomplete and, in some respects, unclear. For example, the leaflet 'How to Pay Your Rent' does not included reference to direct debits (this is covered in the sign-up pack) nor to the fact that the customer contact centre can be contacted out of normal office hours. The 'Rent Arrears' leaflet, unlike arrears letters, does not signpost customers to independent advice services or the housing benefit office numbers and does not show the cash office hours, which are different from the general office hours. There are also no service standards in either leaflet. Customers are therefore given limited information about the scope of the service or the standards they can expect.
- 119** The income management service is not fully customer focussed. For example, direct debit payments for rent can only be made on one date per month. Greater flexibility in payment dates would offer a more convenient service to tenants and may assist them in their money management.
- 120** Customer information for the rents service is inadequate. Currently tenants are not routinely provided with regular statements which show the status of their accounts and a record of payments and charges. Statements or screen prints of accounts, which show recent transactions are often provided for tenants when they are visited about their arrears and are sometimes used with arrears letters and can be provided on request but this information is not routinely provided for tenants.
- 121** CBC has not analysed the different ways that tenants can pay their rent to establish which is the most effective way, in terms of both ease for tenants and value for money. The Council employs a number of rent collectors, but there has been no examination of whether this service represents value for money. As at January 2006, 13.34 per cent of tenants paid their rent via rent collectors, 8.57 per cent by direct debit, 4 per cent by standing orders and 35.36 per cent at the cash office. Thirty-five per cent of tenants had no rent to pay (because of housing benefit entitlement). A very small minority paid by other methods. Direct debit payments are just over 10.5 per cent of payments when charges for garages are taken into account.

- 122** The most cost effective payment methods are not actively promoted and CBC does not actively monitor the proportion of tenants paying by particular methods or have targets in place to increase the proportion of tenants paying by the most cost effective methods. While all payment methods are publicised through the sign-up pack, website and newsletters, this publicity does not promote particular methods, for example, by using the reverse of arrears letters and statements.
- 123** CBC cannot demonstrate value for money in its rent service. It does not know the cost of various rent payment methods and is unaware of customer views about the service as a whole. Customer consultation about payment methods did not include clear information about the costs of each option, so tenants' choices were not informed by relevant information. The consultation identified that there was opposition to the withdrawal of the rent collectors and the Council has decided to keep the service, but without considering a full cost and benefit analysis.
- 124** CBC does not have sufficiently flexible arrangements in place to ensure that the income management service can respond effectively to customers with diverse needs. Neither letters nor information leaflets include straplines in other languages or offer communication in other forms such as large print for people with sight impairments. This means that delays may occur in appropriate advice being provided or tenants not being able to understanding advice, proposed actions or the implications of any proposed action for themselves.
- 125** The Council's approach to vulnerable customers in arrears needs to be more flexible. While the housing service has a supportive approach to those who are receiving tenancy support and works with the support provider to address the arrears issue, partners identify that the approach can be less flexible where there are no formal support arrangements and support needs can identified relatively late in the recovery process. The fact that arrears staff do not currently have access to up to date and comprehensive information about tenants' vulnerability, for example, 'flags' on the rents system, makes this more pro-active approach more difficult.
- 126** Rents staff are equipped to provide early advice to tenants about their rent. Staff have handheld benefit calculators which enable them to estimate likely benefit entitlement and so advise tenants about appropriate rent payments to make while they wait for their housing benefit application to be assessed. The sign-up process has also been revised to involve rents staff. Both of these measures help to avoid rent arrears rising and tenants from falling into debt unnecessarily.
- 127** Rent accounts are clear. They clearly show housing benefit payments and other charges to the account, such as court fees. Housing benefit overpayments are not clearly distinguished on the account statements, although rents staff are able to obtain information about overpayments, through read-only access to the housing benefits system. Clear accounts enable both staff and tenants to readily identify charges and payments.
- 128** There is generally good liaison between rents staff and the Council's housing benefit service. Cases can be assessed more quickly, on request, where legal action is affected. Liaison also occurs regarding deduction of overpayments from tenants' rent accounts, to enable them to manage their debts more effectively.

Good liaison with housing benefit helps to provide customers with a seamless service regarding their rent.

- 129 Rent arrears recovery is pursued in appropriate way. Staff follow clear procedures and there is evidence of personal contact with tenants and the use of out-of-hours calls as well as standard and bespoke arrears letters. There is also evidence of appropriate benefit advice being offered to tenants to enable them to maximise their income.
- 130 Rents arrears staff have read only access to relevant screens of the housing benefits IT system. This enables them to check the current status of applications, how the benefit has been calculated and details of any overpayments. This assists them in advising tenants appropriately about their rent and to make appropriate repayment agreements.
- 131 Arrears letters are clear and use plain language. The action taken or being proposed is clearly explained and a contact name and number within the rents section is provided. This helps to ensure that tenants understand the information included and the seriousness of the issue. Consequently they are more likely to act by either making payments or seek advice.
- 132 Home visits are made to tenants in arrears to help identify how the debt can be cleared at an early stage. Both rent arrears officers and rent collection staff carry out rent arrears visits. Rent arrears staff prioritise the week's action by producing lists from the IT system of those in arrears. Rent arrears officers concentrate on higher level arrears, particularly those over £500, rent collectors working primarily on lower level cases. The arrears lists are produced in order of amount due. The role of rent collectors has changed slightly since October 2005, with fewer days spent on rent collection and more on arrears visits. CBC has tried some out-of-hours arrears work using the call centre. This was not effective and resulted in many referrals back to rents staff, who were asked to call the tenant back the following day.
- 133 The IT systems need to be improved to assist arrears recovery. The rents system is not able to filter arrears cases by agreements broken. Rent officers have to plough through whole list of arrears cases deciding what action to take and which cases to watch; it therefore hampers the effective prioritisation of arrears work.
- 134 Resources have been identified for pursuit of former tenant arrears, to enable the council to improve its performance in this area. A new post has been created to trace former tenants and pursue recovery of outstanding arrears; currently this work is carried out by rent officers and collectors but is given a lower priority than prevention and recovery of current tenant arrears. Former tenant arrears have increased £19,681.65 between April 2005 and January 2006, when they totalled £289,095.44. Current and FTA write off; 2001/02, £62,000; 2004/05, £39,000.
- 135 A former member of the corporate legal team is now located within the housing department, this ensures that rents staff can receive prompt advice on arrears action.

- 136 There are clear arrangements in place with the local courts. The council has agreed block bookings to ensure cases can be heard promptly. In addition, the council attends a court user group. There is evidence of this being used effectively to address administrative and other issues. Good working relationships with the court can help to minimise delays in enforcement activity.
- 137 The Council has clear referral arrangements in place with independent advice services. CBC is able to refer tenants quickly to accessible advice and liaises effectively with the advice agency to agreed appropriate repayment agreements to assist tenants in arrears to clear their debt.
- 138 CBC does not however effectively track the success of referrals to advice agencies to evaluate their impact in terms of; income received; whether tenants fall back into arrears after initial support is provided; whether referrals at particular levels of debt or stages in the arrears process are effective etc. By not monitoring or evaluating this information, the Council is missing the opportunity to learn from the process and to make improvements to it if necessary.
- 139 The Council is not making the most effective use of resources by effectively targeting arrears action. It has not done any debt profiling or specific benefit campaigns to assist rent arrears prevention and recovery. Debt profiling can provide useful insights into who is in debt or likely to fall into debt and can help housing organisations minimise arrears by targeting and prioritising arrears action and debt advice. Advice or benefits promotion can also be tailored to particular groups, which may affect the style, content or format of the information to make it more accessible. This would be greatly helped by collating information on the profile of tenants in arrears to enable prevention work to be designed and targeted.
- 140 Although implementation of the corporate debt policy is not yet embedded within the Council, housing staff are flexible in negotiating sensible repayment agreements that recognise other debts and commitments that the tenant may have. Making realistic payment agreements means that tenants are more likely to be able to sustain repayments and ultimately to resolve their own debt problems.
- 141 Rental loss caused by vacant properties has reduced. The cumulative loss between April and December 2005 is significantly lower than for comparable periods in the previous two years. Cumulative loss as at December 2005 was £164,923.82 as compared with £342,342.57 in 2003/04 and £286,085.41 in 2004/05. The improvement in performance, largely due to reduced time taken to relet properties is matched in month by month losses, which are also reducing. CBC has a maximum rent loss target of £25,000 per month, this has only been exceeded in one month this year (April). The average monthly rent loss is £18,324.68. Rent loss in December stood at 1.57 per cent as compared with 2.87 per cent in April 2005.
- 142 The presence of new staff within the service has contributed to CBC beginning to look outside the organisation at good practice that it can adopt to help improve its overall performance. Examples of include consideration of Corporate Debt policies from other councils when CBC was drafting its own.

Resident involvement

- 143** Tenant and resident involvement in the housing service in Charnwood has not been prioritised and the Council has not appreciated why engaging with customers is a key part of delivering a good service for tenants and housing customers. Consequently the Housing service is not customer focussed and key operational areas that are not working effectively, such as responsive repairs, are not being driven by the needs and views of customers but by the internal requirements of different parts of the Council.
- 144** Regular dialogue with tenant associations that are representative of the tenants they serve would have highlighted poorer performing areas of the service as priorities for action. As this has not been the case at CBC, the priorities for the housing service have been set by officers and members, with little or no action taken to resolve issues of primary concern to tenants such as the long waits for and inconvenience of arranging repairs.
- 145** There has been no discussion with tenants about the standards the housing service should be delivering services to for tenants. There are service standards in place, but these have been decided by officers without reference to customers needs. Tenant representatives are not involved in monitoring performance against service standards.
- 146** Effective resident engagement is not seen to be a key part of all staffs' roles throughout the organisation. Instead it is largely regarded as being the function of the tenant participation officer.
- 147** Tenant engagement is not effectively promoted. There is a tenant and resident participation forum know as Charnwood Council Leaseholders and Tenants Association (CCLATA). The Forum is not effectively promoted and there is no clear way for tenants to understand how to become involved in CCLATA as members are not elected, but invited. It is not clear by what criteria members have been invited to join. Members of CCLATA are not accountable to the tenant body and do not have a system which enables them to report back to the tenant body as a whole, or to help them consult their fellow tenants.
- 148** There are limited opportunities for tenants and residents to become involved in management and decision making and the satisfaction of tenants of council housing with opportunities for participation in management and decision making in relation to housing services provided by their landlord is low, at 62 per cent. There are three tenants and residents associations (one of which is newly formed) but these are not well publicised to tenants. There is no suite or menu of choices available to allow tenants and residents to become engaged in a way that suits their abilities and availability. Not all tenants who want to have a say are able to commit the level of time required to attend regular and formal meetings. However the Council has developed a system known as tenant representatives from home, which has been used to ask tenants opinions on the new tenancy agreement and void standard, but this consultation mechanism is not widely promoted.

- 149 There is very limited tenant involvement in planning, monitoring and designing services. Recently tenant representatives from CCLATA have received recruitment training and have been involved in the selection of some housing officers, but this is not established as a regular feature of how CBC develops its services. Tenants representatives are not able to influence priorities on the housing improvement programme and have not been consulted the choices tenants are offered in terms of improvements to their homes.
- 150 CBC recognises that the tenant and resident involvement service is underdeveloped. The recent stock options appraisal, which required substantial communication and engagement with tenants, highlighted the lack of structures to be able to deliver this necessary engagement. The Council has as a result dedicated £40,000 to assist residents on CCLATA to develop their capacity through working with TPAS to deliver a training programme. The Council acknowledges however, that this training has been commissioned without full analysis of the training and capacity needs of tenants involved in CCLATA, or considering the potential needs for residents who have yet to become engaged with the Council.
- 151 There have been very limited attempts to engage with harder to reach residents or to engage with tenants from minority communities or more vulnerable and isolated tenants. There have been no concerted efforts to try and ensure that resident involvement is representative of the wider tenant and leaseholder population.
- 152 There is adequate funding in place to support the present resident involvement structures. The funding from the housing revenue account for tenant participation and consultation is £66,000 which includes the devolved funding of £23,000 which is transferred directly to CCLATA, the salary and on-costs for the tenant participation officer post, professional membership fees and the twice-yearly newsletters which cost £11,000. In addition, currently CCLATA have an office base at the Council's headquarters, although future plans for this base are not clear as the part of the building in which this is situated are due to be demolished.

Tenancy and estate management

- 153 There are no service standards publicised for tenants on the estate tenancy and estate management service. Target response times for tenancy and estate management have not been agreed with customers and the performance information is not publicised to customers. This means that tenants are not aware of the standards they can expect of the estate and tenancy management service and are not involved in monitoring the service.
- 154 CBC does not know how complete its tenant profile is. While it collects information for new tenants and has a range of information on individual tenancy records, it cannot say how complete the information is or where the gaps are. The information that is held is used on an individual, case by case basis but not strategically to shape services or to plan communication. There is no clear plan in place to complete the profile, although the tenancy management team intend to re-introduce tenancy audits. CBC therefore cannot be sure that services and information are tailored to meet customer needs.

- 155** CBC employs Street Wardens to assist it in managing its estates and deterring and preventing low level anti-social behaviour. The wardens carry out a visual inspection of their patch on a weekly basis and react on a responsive basis, for example, to report fly-tipping, graffiti etc. There are some positive examples which demonstrate work to minimise social exclusion, such as work with single mothers in one area where the street warden was instrumental in arranging access to a place where the mothers could meet informally. The wardens are providing a visible local presence and responsive service for customers.
- 156** Tenants are not involved in monitoring the quality of estate management estate or consulted on environmental improvements. Estate inspections are not advertised effectively to tenants and tenants representatives are not invited to be part of the inspection. Customer consultation is not embedded in the process for arranging environmental improvements. Although there is customer involvement in the tenant bidding scheme and customer views do inform some environmental improvements, customer consultation is not a routine part of decision making about improvements.
- 157** Generally estates are well kept and tidy, although there are isolated incidents of rubbish and furniture being piled in tenants' gardens. Our inspection was carried out in January and so we were not able to observe the effectiveness of the grounds maintenance of estates. Tenants are however, very clear that they regarded this service as inadequate and providing a poor service, with poor grass cutting and removal and failure to deal with problem plants such as trees and leaf removal. The Council could not demonstrate that it has responded to tenants concerns and complaints regarding ground maintenance. There are no current service level agreements for estate functions carried out by other Council departments to assist the housing service in determining the level of service it requires or holding the provider to account for lack of service.
- 158** The cleanliness of communal areas of flats is mixed with some areas poorly managed, dirty and full of rubbish. There is a mixture of cleansing arrangements in place for communal areas, with some having contract cleaners and others with no arrangements. The communal areas service has no service standards and there are no regular inspections of communal areas.
- 159** Visits are carried out to new tenants to ensure that the tenant has settled in. These visits are carried out within a reasonable time from the start of the tenancy. Clear records are kept of the visits which cover a check on household details and contact numbers, a reminder about benefit applications, rent payment and the availability of contents insurance and questions about any additional support required. The visiting officer is prompted to check how the tenant is settling in, the state of decoration, whether the tenant understands how to report repairs and relevant points about how the service works, noting any outstanding repairs that need to be completed. Comprehensive and systematic visits to new tenants help to ensure that any problems the tenant may be experiencing are identified early and so help to sustain tenancies. They can also help to identify non occupation and early issues of anti-social behaviour.

- 160 Tenancy files are generally well kept,(although we did see some files where this was not the case) with clear records of housing applications, tenancy agreements and communications regarding the tenancy kept in order. Files are divided, with property information in one part and tenancy information at the front, including a clear record of previous tenancies. Clear file management assists staff in dealing with enquiries, as they can easily track correspondence and sequence of events. This helps to ensure a good service is provided for customers.
- 161 Letters to tenants about their tenancy are generally clear and written in plain language. Clear correspondence helps to ensure that tenants understand what they are being told and means they are more likely to understand the implications of the information.
- 162 CBC misses opportunities to obtain or check useful information about tenants' preferred method of communication, for example, at sign-up or when a new tenant is visited in their home. Neither checklist used by staff on this occasion prompts them to ask the tenant about their preferred language. Having clear information about tenants' communication needs would help CBC to ensure that they provide a more customer focussed service, providing information and assistance to tenants in a format they are most comfortable with and are most likely to understand.

Anti-social behaviour

- 163 There is a corporate focus on tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB) and the service is co-ordinated through the Council's community safety unit. There are a range of methods to tackle ASB in place including introductory tenancies, acceptable behaviour contracts and anti-social behaviour orders. However, customers have not been involved in the development of the service and there are no customer leaflets outlining the ASB service, no published service standards for customers and customers who report ASB are not always kept informed of progress with their case.
- 164 The IT systems support the effective capture of ASB information. The ASB information IT reporting system is used to record cases irrespective of tenure and whether the case has been reported to the housing department or to the corporate ASB co-ordinator. It can search by area, address, postcode or parish and by complainant, victim, witness or perpetrator and by housing/case officer or case reference number, records of actions clear and history page can be viewed at any one time and there is a clear audit trail on the system which identifies when records are updated. These features together mean that staff can respond quickly to customer or other agency enquiries, which helps to provide a more effective service overall.

- 165** The Council's approach to ASB has been enhanced by partnership working. Additional expertise and resources, such as the services of a police officer seconded to the community safety team and the ASB co-ordinator, have assisted CBC's staff in evaluating options for action and in gathering evidence. This has enabled them to provide a more effective response to customers and to take enforcement action when necessary. However, partners report that not all preventative work identified is undertaken and that low level ASB is not responded to as effectively as the more serious cases.
- 166** Customers have not been involved in the development of the ASB service, in the policy review or in the setting of any standards for response. CBC has only recently started to seek customer views about the service. Although CBC obtains informal feedback from residents cannot be sure that the service is addressing customer priorities or being provided in a way that meets customer needs and preferences.
- 167** There are no customer leaflets outlining the ASB service and no published service standards for customers. Absence of clear information about the service means that some residents may not be aware of the help that CBC can provide and so the ASB may go unchallenged. For those who do access the service, they have no clear standards against which to judge the service they receive.
- 168** The Council's publicity about ASB is mixed. For example, the local press has been used to highlight some successful actions and leaflet drops have been carried out in specific area (Barrow) to alert residents to ASBOs obtained. However, the absence of a regular tenants magazine limits the council's ability to publicise both preventative and enforcement action.
- 169** CBC has provided some local facilities, in consultation, with local residents which provide a diversion from ASB. For example, the creation of a ball court/play area. Staff have also participated in joint action days with the local police, which are used to promote pride in the local area, raise awareness of services available and raise visibility of area staff. An effective anti-graffiti campaign was also carried out on one estate, including publicity, an estate clean up and meetings with residents to try to identify the culprits; the problem is now minimal. Time and resources devoted to diversionary activities can be a useful way of deterring ASB and preventing its escalation, for example, by encouraging local communities to take a greater ownership of play areas near their homes and for them to report ASB when it first occurs.
- 170** The Council has reviewed the range of actions available to it to respond to ASB and has increased the range of options by agreeing to use demotion of tenancies, as an alternative to possession, where appropriate. Having a range of options enables CBC to use appropriate measures to deal with ASB and to limit the number of tenants losing their homes as a result of ASB. CBC uses introductory tenancies for all new tenants in general needs housing.
- 171** CBC has reviewed the effectiveness of the use of introductory tenancies. The review included an assessment of actions taken and panel reviews. The Council has reached the conclusion that their use is considered a success but will still remain under review to monitor the effectiveness of this method of tackling ASB.

- 172 The Council has not explored why there is limited use of mediation as an approach to resolving ASB issues. The Council has access to mediation services but these are very rarely used. The use or otherwise of mediation as a first level response to resolving ASB issues has not been evaluated and so it is not clear why so little use is made of this approach.
- 173 Standard and bespoke letters used when writing to users are clear and generally written in plain language. For perpetrators, letters explain the potential consequences of continued ASB. For complainants, actions are explained clearly, for example, the purpose of diary sheets or arrangements for sound recording equipment to be used. Where cases are closed, this is discussed with complainants and confirmed in writing to them. Clear communication helps both perpetrators and complainants to understand action being taken and the reasons for it.
- 174 However, we also found that customers who report ASB are not always kept informed of progress with case. There is no trigger on the reporting system prompting contact with the complainant, although regular reviews of cases by area managers may pick up lack of contact as an issue. Keeping customers informed of progress is important to retain their confidence that CBC is responding to their complaint and to ensure that they are given the opportunity to influence ongoing action.
- 175 Clear and recorded action plans, which are shared with victims of ASB are not used in case management. There is generally contact with complainants and records show that housing officers have explained some of the action that is being taken in response to the problem and, in some cases, action being taken is confirmed in writing, clear and agreed action plans are not produced. Having such a plan helps to ensure a common understanding of the action planned and options considered and also provides victims of ASB with a record which they can refer to at a later date, if necessary, challenging the council about action not taken.
- 176 Corporately, a victim support group has been established, which involves victims and witnesses in ASB cases from all sectors and housing officers attend this group. Partners also confirmed that they have received positive feedback from customers about support provided to them by individual housing officers. Effective and sensitive support for victims and witnesses of ASB demonstrates a customer focus to the service, a concern for the short and longer term wellbeing of customers and can also encourage and support victims and witnesses to supply the evidence necessary to take appropriate legal action against perpetrators of ASB.
- 177 There is improved liaison with the providers of tenancy support in cases of ASB, whether the tenant is the victim or perpetrator. Regular meetings are now held between the two organisations, at which cases, action and support can be discussed. This work is improving services for customers, helps to prevent incidents from escalating and individuals to sustain their tenancies.
- 178 CBC has inadequate arrangements in place to respond to racial harassment. This is detailed in the diversity section of this report above.

Allocations and lettings

- 179** Information provided individually to applicants for council housing and applicants for transfer is clear and the allocations process is managed in a fair and transparent manner. However, there is very limited consultation or involvement of customers in the service and there are few service standards in place. Customer feedback is sought on the allocations and lettings process but this information is not used to drive service improvements. There is a lack of information to allow customers to make informed choices about where they want to live. There is no limit to customer choice, but currently there is no choice based letting scheme in place and plans to develop one are not well advanced. The allocations policy has been reviewed but not in consultation with customers.
- 180** There has been very limited involvement of customers in the allocations and lettings service. For example, neither applicants nor tenants have been consulted about the lettable standard or customer literature produced to explain the service. There are a few service standards in place for the allocations and lettings service but those which exist are not challenging. Within the corporate standards document there is reference to four standards which relate to the service; a 20-day target for acknowledging applications and a 40-day target for assessing applications plus a general commitment to keeping applicants informed and to making offers in line with the agreed allocations policy. The targets are excessively long and have not been set in consultation with residents. The lack of clear service standards means that customers do not have a clear picture of the service they should receive and CBC cannot demonstrate that it is meeting its own commitments or improving services.
- 181** Information provided for customers about the housing register and applications is clear and written in plain language. The customer leaflet explains who can join the register, how to make an application, how CBC decides who is offered a property, the points which are given to reflect various housing circumstances and circumstances in which allocations may be made outside of the normal points system. The leaflet also refers reader to a related leaflet about transfers and another about appeals; a brief reference to the right to appeal is included in the housing register leaflet itself.
- 182** Information for tenants who wish to obtain a transfer is clear and written in plain language. The customer leaflet explains who can join the transfer list, how to make an application, how CBC decides who is offered a property, the points which are given to reflect various housing circumstances and circumstances in which allocations may be made outside of the normal points system. The leaflet also refers reader to a related leaflet about the housing register.
- 183** Communication with applicants about their individual case is generally clear. Offer letters are clear and written in plain language. They explain whether or not the property is ready for viewing and the implications of refusals. The letters also enclose a housing benefit form for the applicant to complete. Letters to customers who have applied for housing are also clear; they refer to the points system, contain a brief explanation of the points awarded and how these are made up.

This enables applicants to check the points and to challenge these if they think their application has been assessed incorrectly.

- 184 However, some customer literature used in the allocations and lettings service is overformal and unclear. For example, the form used to review housing register applications does not outline the preferences already expressed by the applicant and, although the majority of the form is written in plain language, the notes about providing correct information is very formal ('should a tenancy be granted, based upon information which is later found to be incorrect, then that tenancy will be determined forthwith'). Use of over-formal and legalistic language may result in customers not understanding the information that the council is trying to communicate.
- 185 Only a proportion of applicants for housing are visited, due to the volume of applications since introduction of an open list. Visits are prioritised for older people, disabled people and those threatened with homelessness. Visits can be a useful way of verifying an applicant's circumstances and help to ensure that appropriate offers are made.
- 186 The allocations process is managed in a fair and transparent manner. There are quality checks in place to ensure that applications are correctly assessed. Random lists of applications are carried by the housing needs manager on applications. This ensures that applications are consistently and fairly assessed.
- 187 There is an appeals system in place which provides for independent review of decisions. However, customer information about appeals is not clear about the process and timescales of the review process and so appellants may not be clear about when their appeal will be heard.
- 188 The Council seeks feedback on aspects of the allocations and lettings service. Until recently, separate feedback forms have been used to obtain customer views on the homelessness service, applications assessments and their views as new tenants. In autumn 2005, a new combined survey form was introduced to capture all stages of allocations and lettings and to maximise response rates. These cover the applications process, sign-up and their experience as new tenants.
- 189 However, CBC has not effectively used customer feedback obtained about the allocations and lettings process. Although customer feedback has been sought and issues of individual dissatisfaction have been followed up, the results of returned surveys have not been collated and analysed to identify trends and possible areas for improvement.
- 190 The Council's IT system does not enable staff to allocate properties in the most efficient way possible. For example, the system allows applicants to select preferred areas but does not enable specific preferred streets to be recorded and to distinguish between sheltered and other accommodation for older people. Staff have to check an applicants details on file to enable appropriate decisions to be made, this slows the matching process down, although does not detrimentally affect the quality of allocations decisions.

- 191** Information to enable applicants for housing to make an informed choice is inadequate. For example, they are provided with no information about demand for housing or likely waiting times. Also, they are not given other appropriate information which may affect their choice, such as the fact that applicants with dogs are unlikely to be allocated flats which have a communal entrance door. Providing insufficient or incomplete information means applicants may make choices which unnecessarily delays their re-housing, for example, if they select preferred areas where vacancies are limited and may have been prepared to consider others in order to be housed sooner.
- 192** CBC staff do not routinely accompany prospective tenants to view properties. Accompanied viewings may occur in exceptional cases, for example, where properties are difficult to let or where properties have been grilled for security reasons. Allowing prospective tenants to view properties unaccompanied can put customers at risk and can, in rare cases, lead to unauthorised occupation. It also means that staff are unable to highlight services and local facilities and respond to customer queries on the spot.
- 193** The Council's current allocations policy has some positive features. It does not limit the number of offers which can be made to an applicant and offers a degree of choice to applicants. Enabling applicants to choose their new home rather than be selected for a home is a more customer focused approach which is likely to result in higher tenant satisfaction and longer lasting tenancies; this contributes to the creation of more sustainable communities.
- 194** CBC is not currently allocating homes within the targets set for waiting list, transfer list and homeless applicants. The Council currently seeks to allocate properties by sharing allocations evenly between waiting list, transfer list and homeless applicants. Staff believe this is largely due to the size and type of property vacancies arising not matching the household size and needs of applicants within the various groups but no analysis has been done comparing applicants and vacancies arising to substantiate this.
- 195** CBC has made limited progress towards introducing a choice based lettings scheme. In principle agreement to adopt a CBL scheme was reached in the summer 2004 but a scheme has not been drawn up nor has a clear plan been agreed for implementation.
- 196** CBC has taken positive steps to address ASB and problems of difficult to let properties by using Local Lettings Policies (LLP) at two schemes. The LLPs are in place for two blocks where the type of stock had resulted in a mix of older tenants and young single people and where lifestyle clashes have occurred. Staff state that the LLPs have been successful and that the difficult to let and ASB problems have largely been eliminated. However, CBC does not have effective arrangements in place to review the success or otherwise of local lettings policies in consultation with tenants. The two LLPs that are in place have not been formally reviewed. Failure to review the scheme and not involving residents hampers CBC's ability to learn from the scheme, what worked and why and how to apply these lessons to future LLPs.

- 197 There is no specific guidance for staff to assist them in making sensitive lettings which may be necessary, for example, where neighbours have experienced anti-social behaviour from the previous tenant. CBC's current housing allocations scheme provides different access to housing for housing register applicants and transfer applicants because the points awarded are different for households living in similar or identical conditions. Points are awarded for time on the list for transfer applicants but not for register applicants, also points are awarded for children living in flats for transfer applicants but not for register applicants. This means that some applicants may have to live in unsuitable circumstances for longer than others because of their current tenure.
- 198 CBC has started to address issues of equity in the allocations process and other shortcomings in the current policy. A new allocations policy has been agreed and is due to be implemented in May 2006. The main issues addressed by the review of the allocations policy are consolidation of points for transfer and waiting list applicants, housing of homeless households and prevention of homelessness by awarding appropriate points levels, the need for guidance on the use of discretionary points, move-on arrangements, ensuring account is taken of other housing debts when assessing eligibility, the need for a clear link between medical need and the suitability of current accommodation in the points award and for taking account the needs of households where more than one member has relevant medical needs, equity limits for homeowners and offer limits.
- 199 Consultation regarding the new allocations policy has been inadequate. Service users have not been consulted and consultation with partner organisations included RSLs has been limited. Failure to consult effectively means that CBC cannot be sure that it has addressed all relevant issues, as seen through customers' eyes, and has missed the opportunity to draw on expertise of other stakeholders.
- 200 CBC records and monitors refusals to offers and has used this information to inform its approach to voids management and its allocations policy. For example, properties which are refused three times on grounds of the condition of the property are referred back to maintenance officers or housing officers for inspection and, if necessary, take action.
- 201 CBC does not use exit surveys to illicit the views of tenants leaving their properties. It is therefore missing the opportunity to identify useful information about its services, its accommodation, the neighbourhood and customer understanding about the options available to them which are often factors influencing a tenants' decision to leave. Such information would help CBC to identify possible service improvements and inform its future housing strategies.
- 202 CBC has experienced a high level of offer refusals and lack of response to offers; From 1 April 2005 to 8 March 2006, 1,302 offers were made, of these 45 per cent were refused and 16 per cent has no response However, the Council has taken no action to publicise the implications of this to applicants or to explore further what the causes might be, yet has decided that one response will be to limit the number of offers made to applicants. Following up this information may assist the council in identifying strengths and weaknesses of the service and assist in reducing refusals.

- 203** CBC is not actively monitoring lettings made to applicants from BME communities, for example, by comparing them with the proportion of BME applicants on the housing register or the demographic profile of the area. It therefore cannot demonstrate that access to housing is fair and equitable.
- 204** CBC management of its housing register has some weaknesses. For example, whilst it ensures that waiting list applications are reviewed on an annual basis, by asking applicants to confirm their wish to remain on the list and to notify them of any relevant change in their circumstances or choices, transfer applicants are not asked to do the same thing. CBC relies on them to take the initiative and inform CBC of any changes. This means that offers may be made to transfer applicants who no longer wish to move or whose choices may have changed. There is no regular communication with applicants on the housing register other than about the annual renewal of their application.

Supported housing

- 205** Arrangements to communicate with residents in supported housing are not clear and there has not been effective consultation with service users about the shape and standards of the service. The floating support service to assist vulnerable tenants is effective but is hampered by the Council's allocations policy. Some of the accommodation for sheltered tenants is not of a good quality and there are large numbers of unpopular bedsits with shared facilities. The Council does not have an asset management plan in place to tackle sheltered stock, although there is a programme of conversions of bedsits to two-bedroomed flats. The future funding for sheltered accommodation is at risk and the Council has no risk or contingency plan in place to protect services to residents.
- 206** There has been limited consideration of how the supported housing service can respond to the needs of the diversity of communities in Charnwood and there are no future plans agreed to develop the service to meet the needs of diverse communities. There is very limited understanding of the special support needs of different groups of potential service users, for instance the contact alarm service, which assists people to remain living independently, is not promoted to BME communities and is only available in English. There has been very limited consideration of the needs of other groups of people with special needs such as people with dementia and substance abuse.
- 207** Floating support has been used effectively to support vulnerable tenants and is assisting these tenants to sustain their tenancies. The floating support service is provided by a partner agency, the Bridge. The Bridge tenancy support services cover tenants who are homeless, teenage parents, tenants in temporary accommodation waiting for a tenancy, giving advice and help on benefits, grants, debt advice and other services. Tenancy support officers also try to offer educational advice to young teenage parents and Charnwood Independent Youth Action and Refugee Housing support vulnerable refugees. Tenants who are being supported agree clear support plans and actions taken to assist them in their tenancy are clear and are jointly agreed.

- 208** The effectiveness of the support service is not assisted by CBC's current allocations policy which does not give adequate priority to applicants who wish to 'move on' from supported accommodation to more independent living. This means individuals may have to remain longer in supported accommodation than they need, limiting access for others who need such support. Alternatively, the individuals may leave the supported accommodation and move into a more unsuitable home, with inadequate levels of ongoing support. CBC has acknowledged this and is seeking to address this issue with the new allocations policy.
- 209** There has been limited consideration of the type of service that can most effectively assist tenants in Lingdale House, temporary accommodation comprising of self contained flats for individuals and families accepted as homeless by the Council. The Unit has a full time homeless support officer, but it was unclear what the business case was for this full time post as the role is limited to giving some initial advice about agencies that could assist tenants and clearing flats after tenants had vacated them. This represents an expensive service for tenants, whose rents are paying for the service. Tenants at Lingdale House have not been consulted about their views on the service.
- 210** The communal areas at Lingdale House are not of a good standard. The floors were marked and dirty, the paint work had graffiti scratched into it and repairs to the internal glazing had not been painted, the heaters were rusty and missing paint. The external door was battered looking and dirty. The communal areas repairs and maintenance are considered as part of the five-year maintenance cycle and no consideration has been given to the greater wear and tear that Lingdale house is subject to.
- 211** The Council has undertaken a number of actions to tackle hard to let sheltered accommodation.
- Six with shared facilities were converted into two two-bed first floor flats at Dudley Court Sibleby and one ground floor flat at Sorrel Court Mountsorrel as a pilot scheme in 2004-05.
 - A further eight bedsits are undergoing conversion this financial year in the same locations to the same specifications.
 - Grays Court in Barrow Upon Soar has been redesigned through joint approach with Touchstone Housing Association, tenants were transferred out of one block of the sheltered unit and the vacant block was then refurbished providing 16 units of self-contained accommodation.
 - The vacant block was then demolished and ten bungalows have been constructed on the site.

- 212** However, there is no asset management plan in place to tackle the remaining unpopular sheltered stock which the Council finds difficult to let. Large numbers of supported accommodation are unpopular bedsits with shared facilities. Most sheltered blocks have first floor flats without lifts and so are not suitable for older people. There has been a recent programme of conversion of bedsits to two-bed flats and these are of good quality and have been quickly let but this is not happening as part of an overall strategic approach which considers the ongoing need for sheltered stock.
- 213** The future funding for sheltered accommodation is at risk and the Council has no risk or contingency plan in place to protect services to residents. The support service in sheltered accommodation is currently funded by Supporting People funding which is administered by the County Council. The County is considering reducing Supporting People funding to support wardens services but CBC has not carried out a risk analysis or developed future plans to ensure that it can continue to support sheltered residents if Supporting People funding is withdrawn.
- 214** There are no written service standards for sheltered tenants and they have not been effectively consulted about any of their services. They are not surveyed for their satisfaction with the sheltered service. Sheltered tenants views are not sought and they play no part in monitoring services. Sheltered tenants are not consulted about changes to their service. They were informed but not consulted about the recent changes to the duties of wardens.
- 215** Sheltered tenants are not involved in planning and designing improvement works. Tenants for the newly converted flats are not consulted over the lay out and there is no choice offered in terms of fittings and fixtures. Residents raised concerns that there is no overall windows programme for sheltered stock and so windows are replaced one at a time leaving some residents with one or two double glazed windows but with the remaining old and draughty.
- 216** Allocations officers do not routinely consult with wardens regarding allocations to sheltered schemes. This may mean that unsuitable allocations are made to sheltered schemes, which don't take account of the ability of the warden and other services to provide appropriate support to the tenants.
- 217** Sheltered tenants are unhappy about the lack of response from Grounds Maintenance to their requests to have trees, bushes and the grounds of sheltered accommodation looked after properly. They complain of bushes and trees over hanging and blocking windows and guttering. The grass is cut and left, leaves are not cleared in the autumn leaving the pathways slippy and potentially dangerous. There is no service level agreement (SLA) or service standards in place with grounds maintenance to enable residents to know what services they can expect from grounds maintenance.
- 218** Vulnerable tenants' needs are not considered in the responsive repairs service. Sheltered tenants complained that their repairs are not dealt with promptly and they can wait weeks to have heating and hot water repairs carried out. There is no consideration of varying the time scales of repairs for vulnerable or older tenants and the repairs call system is not able to identify if tenants are more vulnerable and therefore may need a quicker service.

- 219** There has been no value for money analysis of the community alarm service (CAS). In addition to sheltered schemes, the Council provides a communal alarm service for flats that were initially designed for use by older people. The lack of popularity of first floor flats with older people has led to them be re-designated for general use and consequently the numbers of people using the service has reduced (particularly with the introduction of Supporting People charges). The CAS provider has used the additional capacity released to offer the CAS service to six housing associations. There is however no clear value for money assessment of providing these alarm services. The price charged for this work is based on an informal negotiation rather than a full cost assessment.

Is the service delivering value for money?

How do costs compare?

- 220** There has not been a robust cost assessment and comparison of the Council's housing service to ensure that this represents value for money. The Council has analysed the spend per head on Community Housing Services and has found that it is about average when compared against all Districts with both total expenditure per dwelling and management and supervision and repairs and maintenance falling into the lower quartile. We were not able however, to find evidence of a robust analysis of the costs of all parts of the service. In particular the duplication of management and supervision arrangements for the delivery of the repairs and maintenance service have not been robustly considered and analysed. In addition the cost of the rents service has not been effectively analysed to ensure that the most cost effective services are promoted to tenants.

How is value for money managed?

- 221** CBC has not undertaken value for money assessments for the housing service and there has been no overall focus on ensuring value for money and engaging with customers to assess this. The result of this is that parts of the service, (repairs and maintenance in particular) offer poor value for money to tenants.
- 222** CBC has not yet developed effective partnership arrangements in the area of repairs and maintenance. It has commissioned consultants, who have carried out some early work outlining possible options but it has not yet devised partnership documentation or specifications. CBC is therefore not benefiting from some of the economies that can be achieved through partnering arrangements.
- 223** CBC cannot demonstrate that the DLO operation represents value for money. No thorough value for money study has been carried out and there are significant additional costs created through poor communication and as a result of the duplication caused by the fragmented nature of the service and the client: contractor split.

- 224** CBC is not ensuring it gets good value for money through accurate repairs reporting. There is no repairs diagnostic training for call centre staff and they have no access to technical staff. There is no diagnostic software to assist call centre staff and tenants to identify repairs correctly. The highest number of variations per call centre staff is not monitored (to indicate who may need more training) and there is no overall analysis or read through regarding variations as the system for recording variations cannot give this detail.
- 225** There are high levels of variation orders and pre-inspections for repairs which are expensive and not value for money. There is no effective system for agreeing variations to repairs orders. Variation orders have to go from the operative to the supervisor in DLO, then back to the inspector in housing before a decision can be made. This unnecessary duplication is poor value for money and poor customer care.
- 226** CBC is not ensuring that it is able to complete as many repairs on the first visit as possible. The numbers of repairs completed on the first visit is not monitored or reported on. There are a large number of items in the SOR. The Council has not reviewed the SOR to ensure that these are composite and focussed on completing the job.
- 227** The numbers of aborted calls to tenants' homes to either inspect or carry out a repair is not monitored and so the Council does not know how much resource is wasted on calls to properties when tenants are not in. As discussed in the responsive repairs section of this report, there is no appointments system in place to reduce the number of abortive calls and increase customer care for tenants.
- 228** The percentage of emergency repairs is high at 22 per cent. There is an additional cost to delivering emergency calls and so this way of delivering the service is expensive. The Audit Commission recommends a good practice guideline of up to 10 per cent.
- 229** There is no IT link with the out-of-hours service and this has led to call outs for repairs to properties that no longer belong to CBC. This also means that the out-of-hours service is unable to see what repairs reporting activity there has been regarding a property in the day time.
- 230** The speed at which invoices are processed is not monitored as part of the suite of management information reports. Staff report significant delays in invoicing as these are not received in a timely manner from the DLO. Invoices are processed twice, by the DLO and by Housing which is an expensive and unnecessary duplication of tasks.
- 231** Repairs that are tenants' responsibility are not routinely recharged and the Council has not been effective in collecting recharges. There has been a recent focus on recharging tenants for repairs needed to void properties, but to date this has had little impact. This means that other tenants are having to pay for these repairs, through their rents.

- 232** CBC is open to considering options other than use of the DLO for the repairs service, but has not actively explored what the market can offer, with the exception of void repairs. At the same time, it has not effectively challenged the current performance of the DLO in respect of the housing repairs and maintenance service. Failure to do this has resulted in a relatively poor service being provided to customers for some time and continued provision of a service that does not represent value for money.
- 233** There is no clear business case for the use of Design Services who act as a contractor for housing letting and supervising the DH programme. The service is expensive and inefficient and housing have not challenged why it is continuing to use this service to procure and deliver its improvement contract.
- 234** External contractors who deliver aspects of the repairs service have not been subject to any recent value for money analysis. The contracts were let in 1999, with the main DLO contract and there has been no value for money challenge or assessment of these services since this date.
- 235** There are no SLAs in place to allow housing to effectively challenge services that are provided by other departments, where these are falling below customers requirements, for example with grounds maintenance and repairs.
- 236** The Council acknowledges that value for money work has not been prioritised so far and that there are very limited plans in place to ensure that the value for money of housing services is improved for tenants.

Summary

- 237** The housing service is poor. Although there are some positive features to the services provided, these are outweighed by the substantial number of weaknesses. The weakness of the service centre on the lack of customer focus and engagement of tenants on monitoring and evaluating the service. The result is that the service provides a poor service for tenants in key areas such as responsive repairs. The repairs service is focussed on the internal mechanisms of the Council and there is no consideration of tenants' needs with poor communication, duplication and severe inconvenience to tenants.
- 238** The Council is not meeting its legal obligations to carryout gas servicing to appliances in tenants homes and this is placing tenants at risk. There has been little investment in improving tenants' homes and large number are failing to meet the DHS and there are no agreed plans in place to ensure that the DHS is reached by 2010. Charnwood is a diverse community but there has been very limited consideration of the diverse needs of housing customers. There are no service standards in place for tenants.

- 239** The post void repairs process is inefficient and not customer focused with tenants facing very long waits for repairs to be completed and major repairs being carried out causing disruption for tenants. The aids and adaptation service is not promoted effectively to tenants and there are insufficient funds to meet current demand. The housing service is not effectively managing rent arrears and there have been no value for money assessments for the housing service and no overall focus on ensuring value for money.
- 240** The positive features of the service for tenants include; the improvement to customer access at the Council's offices and the call centre; the introduction of a housing improvement programme (although this is limited); the improvement to relet times for vacant homes; the street wardens service and clean and well kept estates; and improvements to some of the sheltered stock.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 241 There have been improvements for customers in some service areas but there are significant areas of the service where performance has not yet been successfully addressed.
- 242 There is evidence of significant improvement in performance in repairing and reletting properties, reducing average turnaround time from 55 days to 25 days. Additional resources have been committed to this area and a working group set up to improve co-ordination of the service and to address the relatively poor performance levels. A dedicated voids team has also been set up within the DLO. Prompt repair and re-letting of properties minimises the time that applicants have to wait for housing, maximises rental income and minimises the detrimental impact that vacant properties can have on the appearance and security of residential areas. The example of success in this area is being used to motivate staff and to illustrate how the effective use of performance information and collaborative working can be used to improve services.
- 243 There has been corporate investment in developing customer reception facilities at the Council's main building which has significantly improved access for all customers including those with mobility and sensory impairments and the Council has introduced and publicised a corporate complaints process. However, there was no involvement of housing customers in the redesign of reception facilities and so the opportunity was missed to redesign access to the repairs service so that reception and call centre staff could provide a seamless service to tenants.
- 244 The Council has responded effectively to the introduction of the Supporting People programme and has brought improvements to the services that housing can offer to support vulnerable tenants. The floating support service is assisting tenants in sustaining their tenancies through a programme of housing related support which is agreed individually with tenants. This is helping tenants to stay living independently in their own homes and is reducing repeat homelessness as tenants successfully sustain their tenancies with targeted support.
- 245 The housing service has invested in the full conversion of one sheltered scheme in Barrow on Soar into good quality accommodation and converted some unpopular sheltered bedsits to good quality two-bedroomed flats for older people with support needs. These conversions have been successful in tackling some of the long term empty properties in sheltered accommodation and a cost benefit analysis has been undertaken to show that the conversions can pay for themselves within three years through rent generated.

- 246** The housing service has prioritised reviewing a number of strategic plans for the service over the last 12 months, including appraising the future options for the housing stock, completing the housing strategy and housing business plan. The local government office for the East Midlands has reviewed the housing strategy and business plan and has found them to be 'fit for purpose'. The Council has had to invest considerable staff resources to achieve the completion of the stock options appraisal by the Government's deadlines and achieve fit for purpose and achieving these targets represents a significant move forward from the time of the CPA assessment in 2004.
- 247** The council is successfully moving the focus of its services to prevention and earlier intervention in ASB and income collection, which is more customer focussed and effective. Although the outcomes have been limited to date, the results so far indicate that the changes to the service to focus on intervention will achieve greater results than a focus on enforcement.
- 248** The council has effectively addressed the lack of action to ensure that gas appliances are serviced annually. Although a number of homes had not been serviced over a number of years, at the time of our inspection, the Council had tackled this effectively and reduced the number of outstanding services to eight with actions in place to address access to these properties.
- 249** However, there are a range of services that have not yet improved for tenants.
- 250** CBC had not, at the time of our inspection, addressed issues of fragmentation of the management and poor performance of the repairs service that has been highlighted in previous inspections and criticised in a recent consultants' review of the service. Management was still split between departments leading directly to communication difficulties and duplication and performance monitoring in terms of responsive repairs is still weak. Failure to effectively address these issues has meant that tenants have been provided with a poor service for some time.
- 251** The Council has moved to address these issues since our inspection and this is discussed in the performance section of the report below.
- 252** The Council is poor at engaging with housing customers and poor areas of customer care have not been addressed. For instance, the fragmentation of the repairs and maintenance service has led the Council to focus on its internal communications issues at the cost of improving services to customers. There is no established culture in housing of involving customers in service monitoring and comment and so the poor services experienced by tenants are not the focus of the service.
- 253** There have been improvements in access to services for tenants but there is limited information available for housing customers about the service.. The investment in developing the call centre and customer service centre has improved physical access and provided a call service that is open for longer hours, which is convenient for tenants that work in the day. However, the lack of integrated IT systems means that tenants calling these services can currently only receive basic information and cannot get any further details, for instance finding out when a reported repair will be done.

The Council has recognised that the current lack of IT integration is not satisfactory and has appointed a project manager to develop an integrated system for all housing services.

- 254 There has been limited focus on identifying and understanding the diverse needs of Charnwood's residents and so the housing service has not identified or responded to the needs of customers. For example; the adaptations service is not promoted; there is no promotion of language line and there has been no assessment of the support needs of vulnerable people including those from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. There is no promotion of the Council's stance against racial harassment and hate crimes.
- 255 Tenants have very limited input to the plans to improve the housing stock and estate environment. The choice of fittings and fixtures for tenants' homes is limited and tenants have not been involved in setting the priorities for the improvement programme and business plan.
- 256 Although the Council is moving towards a preventative approach for tackling rent arrears, this has been very recent and there have been limited outcomes from this to date. Rent arrears are still rising and the Council's performance on rent arrears has worsened. Current rent arrears for 2005/06 are higher than those for 2004/05 and 2003/04. Monthly figures are also higher than for previous years in all months following June 2005. The collection level is also not meeting the council's target. As at December 2005, rent collected as percentage of rent due totalled 97.06 per cent, as against a target for the year of 98.1 per cent. Rent arrears as a percentage of rent debt in December 2005 stood at 3.29 per cent
- 257 The direction of travel for key performance indicators shows that the Council is not achieving sustained improvements for the housing service. The percentage of non decent homes is shown as having improved from 2003/04 to 2004/05 but these figures have not been collected accurately and so do not give a reliable performance picture. Similarly the performance figures for the SAP rating (thermal warmth) of tenants homes and the numbers of repairs appointments made and kept are not collected accurately. The performance indicators for urgent and non urgent repairs show that the Council's performance is in the worst quartile compared to other similar local authorities. The real figures however are worse than those recorded as the system for recording performance information for all aspects of the repairs service is fundamentally flawed. Tenant satisfaction overall and with opportunities for participation is low.
- 258 There is a very limited track record of the housing service improving the value for money of its services and there were no plans in place, at the time of our inspection to address the significant weaknesses of the service in terms of value for money. The Council has moved, however to tackle this following our inspection and has already addressed the fragmentation of the service that was leading to wasted resources and duplication.

How well does the service manage performance

- 259** The housing service has prioritised agreeing a range of short, medium and long term plans and strategies and tenants and stakeholders have been widely consulted about the plans and strategies. There is a service delivery plan for the next year, an agreed and fit for purpose housing strategy and a 30-year HRA business plan. The stock options appraisal process identified the ALMO option as the one most favoured to deliver future management for the housing stock to 2010 and to meet the DHS.
- 260** The Council has moved swiftly, following our inspection, to address the problems caused by the fragmented and unco-ordinated management and delivery of the repairs and maintenance service. For example, technical advisors have been relocated to advise and support the Call Centre staff to improve the accuracy of repairs reporting, and the DLO has been disbanded with the repairs service now being part of the housing service as a whole.
- 261** The Council has invested in developing and training staff in project management to develop services. The Council has set clear objectives for the housing service of developing an ALMO, meeting the DHS and becoming a three-star, excellent service. A robust process of project initiation and planning has been developed to take these plans forward. The monitoring and management roles to over see this development are agreed and in place. The Council's Chief Executive is the Project Board Executive and a Project Board and Manager are in place. The process has been effectively risk assessed. At the time of our inspection improvement plans to address the corporate objective of housing becoming a three-star service were being drafted and these identify the key areas that need to be addressed to take the service forward. However these have yet to be agreed and in their draft form are not yet fully SMART as they do not identify the resources needed to improve services. The priorities of the improvement plan have not yet been discussed and agreed with tenants.
- 262** Corporately a programme of projects has been drawn up to address key priorities; these include the ALMO and three-star objectives for Housing. The Council has recently reviewed and strengthened its Change Management Directorate to strengthen the support to these projects that have been prioritised to improve the Council's services. A clear project planning framework has been introduced and relevant senior staff trained in this. Such a framework should assist the council in progressing key projects and achieving service improvements.
- 263** CBC has recently introduced effective communication arrangements, which are used to ensure that staff are kept up to date with current issues. A regular corporate 'core brief' is used to provide information on organisation wide issues, team meetings are held at which staff can raise issues as well as receive information cascaded down from the Director of Housing. Many staff also speak positively about their relationship with their team leaders and managers which enables them to raise problems, suggest service improvements and discuss performance issues openly.

These clear routes of communication help to ensure that frontline staff are aware of service aims and achievements and feel encouraged to suggest or initiate service improvements.

- 264** CBC has some positive measures in place to manage individual performance. For example, staff have annual performance and development reviews with their managers. These are used to identify broad objectives, performance issues, training and support needs.
- 265** However, there are weaknesses in the framework for individual and team performance monitoring. For example, staff do not all receive feedback on their performance and achievements through a framework of regular one to ones with their managers. Staff in many service areas are unclear about how their performance is assessed and have no specific targets that they work to. They are broadly aware of service priorities and objectives but their individual work is not explicitly linked to targets or these overall objectives. The lack of these elements results in energy and resources being focussed on areas of work which are not priorities and on reduced motivation of staff, if they fail to see a clear link between their own work and the organisations achievements. Staff at the DLO have not been included in any service development planning and there are not clear objectives in place for them to see how their services contribute towards the overall objective of delivering a three-star housing service.
- 266** There has been a lack of customer focus throughout the housing service and customers are not consulted on the design or delivery of services. This is compounded by the fact that the housing service is fragmented across different parts of the council with little or no co-ordination between the functions. There is no corporate focus is on developing a co-ordinated approach to ensure an effective customer focussed organisation that will meet tenants and other customers needs. Performance information for a range of customer focussed areas is inaccurate and giving a misleadingly positive picture of the service. However the Council has acted swiftly to address many of the issues that the inspection process highlighted, removing the housing service fragmentation that was the cause of poor communication and co-ordination.
- 267** As a result of the lack of customer focus, Housing's approach to service improvement planning has not effectively involved customers and other stakeholders until recently. Failure to do this earlier has meant that the plans may not address customer and stakeholder priorities and that the council is missing the opportunity to develop informed improvement plans that reflect customer needs and which take full account of the contribution that stakeholders can make.
- 268** Key performance objectives and indicators have not been set in consultation with tenants. The performance of the responsive repairs service is not identified as a key indicator on the performance score card and therefore has not been part of the Council's performance management appraisal to date. Customers are not involved in scrutiny and performance and the performance of the housing service is not reported to tenants.

- 269** Effective performance management has been hampered by the fact that service delivery plans and performance reports for repairs and maintenance are reviewed separately from other housing issues. This means that the service has not been reviewed as a whole and decisions about prioritising the allocation of resources to address service weaknesses cannot be made effectively.
- 270** Effective performance management is undermined in a number of areas of the responsive repairs service as the system for collecting the information is fundamentally flawed and produces inaccurate information. In addition performance information is not produced for key service areas for instance: the numbers of repairs jobs cancelled through non access; the number of cold call visits where tenants are not in; the number of repeat visits to gain access. This is key performance, value for money and customer care information.
- 271** The Council has moved to address the fragmented and inaccurate performance information and management. The revised structure that incorporates the whole of housing services means that performance will be considered and scrutinised as a whole and the capacity of officers to vary performance targets has been removed. New performance indicators have been introduced to gain a more accurate picture of the service's performance.
- 272** There are weaknesses in performance monitoring arrangements for rent arrears. For example, there is no current target set and arrears staff are not aware of a target set for the current year for arrears levels or collection rates. There are no local performance indicators in place for the service and staff are unaware of how their performance is judged by their managers, other than by overall arrears levels being reduced. Ineffective performance management means that arrears work is not sufficiently focussed and that upwards trends in arrears will not be spotted sufficiently early to enable effective action to be taken to address the problem.
- 273** Performance management and monitoring for tenancy and estate management is under-developed. CBC has recently started to produce information from its IT systems which assist area managers in monitoring the implementation of tenancy and estate management procedures, including whether or not staff are responding to customers within target timescales. But this has not yet been used to change or review the service or resources. Progress with specific cases is reviewed regularly, but the IT system does not currently alert managers to missed or late actions to assist them with this monitoring.
- 274** CBC has not effectively addressed access to services for or the involvement of hard to reach groups. It has not clearly identified those groups and does not have a clear strategy in place to address issues of exclusion. This approach means that some groups or individuals may be inadvertently excluded from services and from involvement in shaping those services.

- 275** CBC has not been effectively learning from customers' views of their service through capturing all service complaints relating to repairs and maintenance, as the DLO was not using the corporate complaints recording system and was not effectively capturing and recording them elsewhere at the time of our inspection. The Council has acknowledged that this was a weakness in the corporate complaints system and through disbanding the DLO has ensured that all housing services are now subject to the corporate complaints process.
- 276** CBC has acted on a range of issues raised in the inspection. This action demonstrates that CBC listens and learns from suggestions to improve its service to customers. For instance:
- the accuracy of repairs reporting has been strengthened by the location of two technical advisors in the Call Centre to assist and advise the call centre staff who are taking repairs reports;
 - a flag has been added to the Call Centre screens to highlight non access for gas servicing. This increases the Council's opportunities for access when repairs are being carried out;
 - a system for random checks on allocations has been introduced, in addition to the existing checks on housing register application. Such checks help to ensure allocations are being made consistently and fairly;
 - a leaflet has been developed and printed to advertise the language line service; and
 - the delivery of the repairs and maintenance service has been subject to wholesale reorganisation to remove the fragmentation and duplication. The service is now all located within one management area and with a portfolio holder with overall housing responsibility.
- 277** There is a clear commitment to developing a more customer focussed service in the Housing department but this has not yet delivered outcomes that tenants will notice. New senior staff recruited to the Council within the last two years, including the Chief Executive and senior staff within the housing department, have begun to change the culture of the organisation. Clear leadership and commitment to improve service from senior managers means that change is more likely to occur and be sustained.
- 278** CBC encourages staff to make suggestions to improve the service by way of a suggestion scheme. Individual suggestions which are implemented are rewarded and, at the end of each year, a dinner is held at which an award is made for the best suggestion. Incentive schemes for staff can help to create a culture of openness and continuous improvement, which benefits both the organisation and its customers.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 279** The Council has moved to address the problems of skills and capacity gaps in the repairs and maintenance service. It has brought in external consultants to fill key gaps in posts, skills and experience. The need to give strong leadership to develop the repairs and maintenance service has led to the appointment of an overall Project Manger for repairs and maintenance and a repairs manager to dismantle the DLO and trading account and develop a one service approach to repairs delivery.
- 280** The Council has recognised that the plans it had in place to address capacity issues following the findings of the APSE report, had not been successfully addressing the problems identified. The Council has consequently reviewed this approach and as a result is now focussing on a one system approach to landlord services and has reorganised the housing service to remove the split between the DLO and housing which was contributing towards the poor communication and duplication.
- 281** The Council has recognised that the housing IT system is old and not fit for purpose and has employed an ICT projects manager to review and develop an integrated IT system that is fit for purpose. The service currently has three separate IT systems that are not integrated. CBC's current IT hampers managers' ability to effectively manage their service.
- 282** Staff are committed to delivering a better service for customers and they are able to identify the causes of problems with key service areas such as repairs. Having a committed and motivated staff force that are willing to change work practices and systems to deliver a better service, means that the Council will be able to implement service improvements more effectively.
- 283** Sickness and absence reporting and monitoring arrangements have been reviewed and revised and are now more robust. Managers are now required to follow up sickness absences more promptly and more formally and information derived from short term sickness reports is now being analysed to identify any common trends that may inform future action. A number of long term sickness issues have now been resolved. This action will help to maximise the council's capacity to deliver service improvements and should highlight any people management issues which need to be addressed.
- 284** CBC has acted on the identified need to bring about cultural and organisational change, for example, in appointing a Change Manager to assist the process. It also has an HR strategy, 'Performance through People', which provides a framework for staff training, development and capacity building and performance management.
- 285** The programme of change is fully supported by elected members. There is clear leadership for improvement in the housing service from the Portfolio holder for housing. The review of the housing service now means that the portfolio holder for Housing is now Cabinet lead for all housing services which will enhance members' management and scrutiny functions.

- 286 The Council is actively working develop the capacity of the tenants and leaseholders forum. It has engaged TPAS to work with residents across the area to develop their skills, confidence and ability to be effectively involved in service improvement. Ensuring that tenants have the capacity for effective involvement makes it more likely that their views will be heard and that they can have a positive input into service improvement and in the scrutiny of services.
- 287 Rents' staff have not had sufficient training in order to carry out their role effectively. Little formal training has been provided in the last two years and rent collectors have not received training on the skills necessary for their widened role, which now includes more arrears visits. Inadequate support for staff may result in tenants being provided with incorrect or inadequate advice about their debts and benefit entitlement which, in turn, will affect the tenants' ability to reduce or repay their arrears.
- 288 The rents service has not been adequately resourced to enable an effective service to be provided. Two current rent officer posts are filled by temporary staff and there has been significant turnover in the team and changing management arrangements. These have resulted in a lack of continuity in the team. This has hampered service provision; rent arrears performance has not been effectively addressed and service enhancements have not progressed.

Summary

- 289 We judged the prospects for improvement to be promising due to the following reasons.
- The Council can demonstrate that it has improved a range of services for tenants and customers such as: significantly improving re-let times; improved access arrangements at the Council's main offices; converting some of the unpopular sheltered accommodation and through providing an effective floating housing service to support vulnerable tenants. Considerable resources and effort have been successfully applied to develop and agree the strategic focus of housing and the stock options appraisal has been completed and the housing strategy and business plans are fit for purpose. The Council has recognised that the improvement plans that it had in place to develop the repairs and maintenance service have not been effective and has refocused this work. However, the new plans have not yet resulted in many service improvements for tenants. Tenants have been receiving a poor service for some time.
 - The Council has set clear objectives for the housing service of developing an ALMO, meeting the DHS and becoming a three-star, excellent service. A robust process of project initiation and planning has been developed to take these plans forward. The housing service has prioritised agreeing a range of short, medium and long term plans and strategies and tenants and stakeholders have been widely consulted about the plans and strategies. The Council has moved swiftly following our inspection to address the problems caused by the fragmented and unco-ordinated management and delivery of the repairs and maintenance service.

- The performance management of the service has been weak but the Council has moved to address the fragmented and inaccurate performance information and management. Performance will be considered and scrutinised as a whole and new performance indicators have been introduced to gain a more accurate picture of the service's performance.
- Tenants are not engaged in monitoring services. Priorities for service improvement are not set in consultation with tenants and other stakeholders and so key priorities for tenants, such as the repairs service have not been the focus of improvement work. TPAS are now providing training for tenants and leaseholders to enhance their capacity and skills, ensuring that they will be able to effectively contribute to service improvement and monitoring activities.
- The Council has moved effectively to address the problems of skills and capacity gaps in the repairs and maintenance service. The plans to develop the housing service and move to an ALMO have been effectively risk assessed and the necessary capacity has been identified for the key roles to take this forward. A project manager has been appointed to address the capacity difficulties caused by the current IT systems and there is full member support for the change programme. However, there are still some still some gaps in skills and training that have yet to be addressed.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	DAs top 25% 2003/04	Charnwood 2002/03	Charnwood 2003/04	Charnwood 2004/05*
BVPI 63 Average SAP rating	68	62	63 ⁴	63 ⁵
BVPI 66a Percentage rent collected	98.3	96.6	96.6	96.7
BV74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	93	n/a	83	n/a
BV74b Percentage BME tenants satisfied with overall service	83	n/a	77	n/a
BV75a Percentage tenants satisfied with participation	78	n/a	67	n/a
BV184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	21	n/a	39 ⁶	44 ⁷
BV184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	23	n/a	5 ⁸	11 ⁹
BV185 Percentage repairs appointments made and kept	90	0	088	9 ¹⁰

⁴ Qualified

⁵ Qualified

⁶ Qualified

⁷ Qualified

⁸ Qualified

⁹ Qualified

¹⁰ Qualified

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - CBC's self assessment;
 - Housing Strategy;
 - Housing Business plan;
 - Housing leaflets;
 - Housing service plan;
 - performance reports;
 - Improving the repairs and maintenance report;
 - Internal audit reports for repairs;
 - Race equality strategy;
 - DDA plan; and
 - minutes of the meetings of CCLATA.

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - running separate focus groups with, frontline staff, operatives and tenant representatives;
 - interviews with staff, councillors and partners;
 - visiting housing for older persons;
 - viewing property improvements;
 - shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
 - visits to all local offices;
 - estate inspections;
 - attended tenant forum meeting; and
 - talking to tenants.